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The Never Good Enough Mother: Escaping Motherhood in Two Contemporary Novels

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Abstract. Two contemporary novels speculate about alternative realities for women as mothers. In *When Women Were Dragons* (2022), Kelly Barnhill imagines an alternate history set in 1950s United States where women assert agency by becoming literal dragons and abandoning their families and responsibilities. Sisters and nieces take on the mother role but also feel constrained by the responsibility that has been thrust upon them. While Barnhill resolves the conflict through a maternal utopia, *The School for Good Mothers* (2022) by Jessamine Chan creates a dystopian future where women are punished for failing to be good mothers. Bad mothers are given the choice to attend a school to become good mothers and earn their children back. Drawing upon Sharon Hays (1996) definition of intensive mother and Solinger and Ross's (2017) reproductive justice, this paper interrogates contemporary anxieties about motherhood that these two novels reflect by examining bad mothers. While Chan explores the consequences of surveillance culture particularly for mothers from marginalized groups, Barnhill imagines an alternative, more hopeful result of second wave feminism, but to become free the women must literally transform.
Keywords: motherhood, intensive mothering, dystopia, alternate history, bad mothers.

Vis negera: pabėgusios motinos motyvas dviejuose šiuolaikiniuose romanuose

Santrauka. Straipsnyje aptariami du šiuolaikiniai amerikiečių autorių romanai, kuriuose permąstomos alternatyvios motinystės realybės. Romane *When Women Were Dragons* (2022) Kelly Barnhill vaizduoja alternatyvią praeitį 1950-ųjų Jungtinėse Amerikos Valstijose, kur moterys emancipuojasi tapdamos tikromis drakonėmis ir palikdamos savo šeimas bei pareigas. Seserys ir dukterėčios perima motinos vaidmenį, bet taip pat jaučiasi suvaržytos joms užkrautos atsakomybės. Priešingai Barnhill motinystės utopijai, Jessamine Chan romane *Gerų motinų mokykla* (2022) vaizduojama distopinė ateitis, kurioje moterys baudžiamos, kad nesugeba būti geromis motinomis. „Blogos" motinos gauna galimybę lankyti mokyklą, kad taptų geromis motinomis ir susigrąžintų savo vaikus. Pasitelkiant Sharon Hays (1996) „intensyvios motinystės" sampratą bei Solinger ir Ross (2017) mąstymą apie reprodukcines teises, straipsnyje nagrinėjamos abiejuose romanuose atskleidžiamos šiuolaikinės motinystės baimės, susitelkiant į „blogos" motinos figūrą. Romanų analizė leidžia daryti išvadą, kad Chan romane pabrėžiamos stebėjimo kultūros pasekmės motinoms iš marginalizuotų grupių, o Barnhill kuria labiau viltingą antrosios bangos feminizmo viziją, kurioje, norėdamos tapti laisvos, moterys tiesiogine prasme turi transformuotis.
Reikšminiai žodžiai: motinystė, intensyvus motiniškumas, distopija, alternatyvi istorija, blogos motinos.

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The Never Good Enough Mother: Escaping Motherhood in Two Contemporary Novels

Literary fiction portraying contemporary motherhood in the United States has become increasingly popular in the twenty-first century as it provides recognizable versions of mothering experiences. Novels such as *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) by Celeste Ng, *The Mothers* (2016) and *The Vanishing Half* (2020) by Brit Bennett, and *Such a Fun Age* (2019) by Kiley Reid offer contemporary representations of motherhood in the United States, specifically. As representations of the broad field of speculative fiction, Kelly Barnhill's *When Women Were Dragons* (2022) and Jessamine Chan's *The School for Good Mothers* (2022) consider questions of how a bad mother is defined by society and whether it is possible for different definitions of good motherhood to be accepted. As Marek Oziewicz (2017, p. 1) writes, "speculative fiction represents a global reaction of human creative imagination struggling to envision a possible future at the time of a major transition from local to global humanity." By choosing to depict motherhood through a speculative genre, Barnhill and Chan question the acceptance of societal definitions of good and bad mothers while supposing alternate responses to these stereotypes. The fantastical and dystopian worlds represented in *When Women Were Dragons* and *The School for Good Mothers* provide versions of bad motherhood that are both chilling and relatable. This paper interrogates both novels' portrayal of mothers who are perceived by society as unfit but ultimately critique the forms of intensive motherhood that have shaped the definition of a good vs. bad mother.

In *When Women Were Dragons,* Barnhill looks back on the oft-idealized 1950s and imagines an alternate history, which is a genre of speculative fiction typically used to imagine dramatically different outcomes to important world events such as Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016). However, in *When Women Were Dragons,* Barnhill imagines a completely fantastic event that is a response to women's feelings of limitation in 1950s United States society because of the idealized nuclear family (Coontz, 1992). The event occurs in 1955 when nearly 200,000 women in the United States become dragons on the same day and leave their homes and families. By treating women's inter-species transformation as completely plausible, the novel is grounded in the genre of alternate history rather than fantasy. Barnhill uses the first-person testimony of the protagonist, Alex, before a congressional committee as well as earlier notes from a doctor studying the "dragoning" to emphasize the potential reality of this supernatural event. Rather than focusing on the larger, societal effects of "the Mass Dragoning" as the event is called, Barnhill examines the aftermath from the perspective of a family who lost an aunt and mother. Marla becomes a dragon, leaving behind a baby daughter, Beatrice, who is first cared for by Marla's sister and later by her niece, Alex. After the death of her mother due to cancer, an adolescent Alex and her cousin Beatrice are abandoned by Alex's father and left to care for themselves. Most of the novel focuses on the teenage Alex caring for her cousin, Beatrice, while coping with the reality of dragons including her Aunt Marla who returns to resume her role as mother to the girls. Although Alex perceives her aunt as a bad mother for abandoning her

young daughter, the novel concludes with her acceptance of Marla, which is reflective of a larger societal acceptance of dragons as other mothers.

By contrast, *The School for Good Mothers* is set in an unknown (near) future United States. At first the setting appears to be an ordinary contemporary city in the United States. But the reader quickly realizes that in this version of the United States, the government has taken some drastic measures to try to ensure the safety of children. Unlike *When Women Were Dragons*, which focuses on the past, *The School for Good Mothers*, like Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), depicts a dystopian future United States. Systems such as child protective services exist in the early twenty-first century United States, but Chan uses the dystopian genre to present horrifying possible punishments for mothers who do not conform to the ideal of a mother who cares well for her children. The novel follows the protagonist, Frida, after she has a bad day (where she leaves her toddler daughter at home alone for a few hours). Consequently, her daughter, Harriet, is removed from Frida's custody. To regain custody of Harriet, Frida is offered the opportunity to go to a "school for good mothers" for a year as a form of rehabilitation (Chan, 2022, p. 75). Throughout the year, Frida, along with a group of other bad mothers, is trained in all aspects of good mothering. A primary dystopian feature of the novel is robot children the mothers are required to care for and bond with. The methods used by the school to train good mothers reveal horrifying ideas about a rote and mechanized scientific approach to parenting that removes the spontaneity of love in motherhood. Despite her efforts to succeed in the school's program, Frida finds herself at first failing but then resisting due to her disagreement with the school's definition of a good mother. She recognizes that the school does not accept other forms of mothering and ultimately commits a final reckless act as a bad mother in an attempt to mother her daughter.

Since both novels focus on portrayals of bad mothers, I will begin by defining the bad mother. Scholars of motherhood largely define the bad mother as the opposite of the good mother. In contemporary motherhood scholarship, the ideology of intensive mothering as theorized by Sharon Hays (1996) exerts considerable influence. However, recent theories such as reproductive justice offer an intersectional approach to reproduction and motherhood. To identify how these novels critique intensive motherhood through their portrayal of bad mothers**,** I will identify the reasons Marla and Frida are considered bad mothers, interrogate the societal factors that drove them to abandon their children, demonstrate their attempts to use intensive mothering to rehabilitate themselves as good mothers, and consider whether they are ultimately successful in their questioning of good motherhood. By drawing connections between the critiques of contemporary motherhood that these examples of speculative fiction offer, I hope to point out the continued relevance of the ideology of intensive mothering and impossibility of living up to these ideals in the contemporary United States.

Defining the "Bad Mother" in Critical Discourse

The bad mother can be difficult to define because scholars often define the bad mother as the opposite of the good or virtuous mother. For instance, Rylee Igel (2024) argues that

Frida in *The School for Good Mothers* is a bad mother because she fails to embody the virtues of nineteenth-century imperial motherhood. Samira Kawash attempts to differentiate between bad mothers who "are defined in terms of poverty, geography, or race," and "the really bad mothers…the ones who abandon, harm, or perhaps kill their children" (2011, pp. 982-983). While women may not be able to or want to change the former descriptors, the latter definition focuses on the actions that women may take. Sociologist, Dorinda 't Hart (2024) explains that women she interviewed defined other women as bad mothers primarily based on identity markers or failure to enact good mothering rather than on bad actions. Kawash's definition is significant because it considers actions that women take as bad rather than aspects of their identity or condition, which they may have little to no control over. She further asserts that "the logic of adoption is to sort women into good mothers, who deserve children, and bad mothers, who are enjoined, expected, or forced to surrender their children to good mothers" (Kawash, 2011, p. 982). If a woman fails to live up to the expectations of a good mother, she may be labeled a bad mother in danger of losing her children to women who are identified as more deserving or as good mothers.

The use of the label of bad mother by the state can demonstrate the slipperiness of the definition that is dependent upon the ideology of the good mother**.** In their introduction to *Bad Mothers: Regulations, Representations, and Resistance*, Michelle Hughes Miller, Tamar Hager, and Rebecca Jaremko Bromwich write: "we are still working to identify the processes by which the Bad Mother is used by state actors, cultural channels, and other officials to designate and punish bad mothers" (2017, p. 9). The definition of bad mother can be applied to any mother who does not meet the standard of the good mother according to the state, society, or culture to differing effects. *The School for Good Mothers* demonstrates the dangers of state intervention in attempting to force a specific definition of a good mother. In *When Women Were Dragons*, the women are critiqued by society as bad mothers when they do not subsume their own identities to become devoted wives and mothers. Both novels define mothers as bad because they take specific actions that are widely perceived as morally bad. However, their unfitness as mothers extends beyond the specific action to encompass aspects of their identities which do not meet the standard for good mothers established in the novels and may contribute to pushing them to abandon their children. Once the bad mother is established as either having an identity that makes her bad or takes actions that are judged as bad, we must consider contemporary definitions of the good mother in United States society and culture.

The Construction of the Good Mother as an Intensive Mother

Hays (1996) developed the theory of intensive mothering, which asserts that women should subsume their own identity into that of mother and should sacrifice their own needs in favour of the needs of their children. According to Hays, "the methods of appropriate child rearing are construed as child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive" (1996, p. 8). From the first moment of motherhood, women are expected to be wholly absorbed in meeting the needs of their

children in part because of their biological connection. Bad mothers are automatically perceived as selfish and unwilling to make the necessary sacrifices to meet their children's needs (*ibid*., p. 125). Hays does not see intensive mothering as exclusively an ideology of stay-at-home mothers. Rather she asserts that it might appear, "mothers who stay at home would be more committed to the ideology of intensive mothering than their paid working counterparts" but through her study she discovered "both groups share a deep commitment to the ideology of intensive child rearing" (*ibid*., p. xiii). While a working mother may be perceived as less focused on mothering because of her commitment to her career, mothers with outside employment often express guilt or shame that they are not able to devote their time exclusively to parenting. Stay-at-home mothers, on the other hand, may face financial hardships from supporting a family on a single income. This identification of the pressure all mothers experience to engage in intensive mothering appears in both novels discussed below as well as throughout early twenty-first century American society.

The Continued Relevance of Intensive Mothering

While Hays' analysis of intensive mothering ideology in the late twentieth century is nearly thirty years old, the theory continues to exert considerable influence. For instance, *Intensive Mothering. The Cultural Contradictions of Modern Motherhood*, edited by Linda Rose Ennis (2014), considers ways that women express their commitments to intensive mothering as well as the systems that perpetuate this ideology. Ennis asks: "Can intensive mothering be a self-sacrificial exercise for mothers... as well as a self-interested way for mothers to feel as they are gaining status through their children?" (2014, p. 7). Good mothers subscribe to intensive mothering as a way to cement their maternal identity, but this may not be exclusively their own choice. Molly Wiant Cummins writes that "intensive motherhood...is a pervasive discourse affecting how society judges mothers while the discourse is also reproduced by mothers" (2024, p. 453) as she reflects on her own tendency to enact intensive motherhood as a mother. In addition, Maya Autret et al. analyzed 54 articles, primarily published since 2014, that used the ideology of intensive mothering as the theory for studying facets of motherhood (2024, p. 52). These authors largely agree that Hays' tenets of intensive mothering are still prevalent in motherhood discourse in the United States today. While failure to live up to the standards of good mothering may contribute to feelings of guilt that Wiant Cummins (2024) and 't Hart (2024) discuss, when a specific standard is embraced and enforced by the state we can see a regression of women's rights to parent and to make individual choices for themselves and their families. The systems that perpetuate this dangerous ideology continue unchecked and have become even more deeply engrained in U.S. culture in the first decades of the twenty-first century with the rise of groups such as Moms for Liberty and the suppression of women's reproductive rights.

Reproductive Justice Resists the Bad Mother Definition

Reproductive justice argues that women should have rights to exercise autonomy over their reproductive choices and which includes both the right to avoid pregnancy and reproduction and the freedom to parent in a way that fits their culture and values (Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger, 2017). Furthermore, reproductive justice attends to issues of intersectionality (Patricia Hill Collins, 1990; Kimberle Crenshaw, 1995) because women of color have frequently been judged bad mothers and critiqued or limited in their attempts to mother. As Ross and Solinger argue, "reproductive justice analysis allows us to understand that some fertile people are disciplined for pregnancies or for exercising reproductive autonomy, while others are honored for the same things" (2017, p.139). This is in contrast to Adrienne Rich (1976) and Hays (1996), who trace the establishment of the ideology of the good mother as an intensive mother, supportive of the nuclear family, and Fixmer-Oraiz (2019), who demonstrates that the state views mothers as either good or bad based on how likely they are to produce good citizens. While reproductive justice may appear to be focused exclusively on access to contraceptives, pregnancy, and birth, which are important issues for feminists, Solinger and Ross extend their concern "to questions about whose mothering and parenting rights are affirmed and whose are harmed and diminished" (2017, p.183). Using the approach of reproductive justice to analyze *When Women Were Dragons* and *The School for Good Mothers* allows me to explore how these speculative novels critique the standards of intensive mothering in the United States.

Bad Mothers are Selfish

The two primary mothers in *When Women Were Dragons* and *The School for Good Mothers,* Marla and Frida, are both characterized as bad mothers from the beginning of the novels. Both women take specific actions (they abandoned their children) that make them bad; however, they also both have identity characteristics that cause them to fall short of the ideal of good mother espoused by intensive mothering and the security state. I posit that their bad mother identity prevents them from being supported by society, which ultimately drives them to abandon their children.

Marla does not fit the model of the 1950s housewife (Coontz, 1992) for several reasons, which makes her a fascinating character to her niece, Alex. A typical 1950s housewife prioritizes caring for her husband and children by caring well for their home. She takes care to keep both her home and her person well-decorated and in order (Coontz, 1992). Unlike the model housewife, Marla is career-focused and acts as the primary provider for her family. Marla's career is particularly unwomanly as she is a mechanic rather than a feminine career such as nurse or teacher (Barnhill, 2022, p. 15). Further building on Marla's unfeminine identity, Alex also discovers after her aunt's disappearance that her aunt is a lesbian and had a relationship with a woman, Edith, before marrying Beatrice's father. Marla transforms into a dragon, embracing her true nature as an independent woman and ultimately abandoning her child, Beatrice. Reflecting on her aunt, Alex says: "She

couldn't be bothered to stay. She left her body and left her life and *life*.... And now we were alone…*You left us. You abandoned us*" (Barnhill, 2022, p. 166, italics in original). Alex sees her aunt's queer sexual identity and pursuit of a masculine career as selfish characteristics that ultimately lead her to become a dragon and ultimately abandon her family. While Marla is the primary provider for her family, no one offers to help her leave her alcoholic husband or provide some support for her. Rather than considering the societal factors that drove women such as Marla to transform and leave their families in the novel, the United States depicted in the novel elected to place responsibility upon the individual women because "given the assumed femininity of dragons, and the Mass Dragoning's accepted connection to something as private as motherhood" (Barnhill, 2022, p. 59), it was perceived as an individual rather than institutional problem. As Hays writes: "A bad mother... neglects her kids for selfish reasons, because she is more concerned with her personal fulfillment, her leisure pursuits, her material possessions, and her status than she is with her children. All this is closely tied to the logic of sacred children and sacred mother" (1996, p.125). Throughout the novel, it is stressed that when women like Marla transform into dragons and leave their families, people who are perceived as unfit for childcare, such as men and children, are left to shoulder this responsibility. Fleeing her responsibility as a mother ultimately makes Marla a bad mother.

Frida, in *The School for Good Mothers,* shares some similarities with Marla, but her circumstances and situation are different. Although Frida is desperate to devote herself to being a wife and mother, she quickly finds herself a single mother after her husband, Gust, leaves her for a woman who fits the ideal of a young, white, middle-class, stay-at-home mother. Gust's new partner, Susanna, serves as a foil to Frida by being portrayed as the stereotypical good mother**.** She has dedicated herself to caring for Harriet and has easily become pregnant with her own child by Gust. Frida sees Susanna as not only a rival, but also as a usurper who has taken away the opportunity for a nuclear family that Frida hoped to have. Due to her single mother status, Frida must focus on her career to support her longed-for child, Harriet. However, due to her adherence to the tenets of intensive mothering, Frida accepts a job for which she is overqualified and is paid less, but which allows her to telecommute on days when she is caring for Harriet. She defends her choice to the court-appointed psychologist: "I'd rather spend the whole day playing with her, but I have to work. It's better than sending her to day care. I don't want strangers taking care of her" (Chan, 2022, pp. 44-45). As Hays asserts, women find themselves navigating the necessity to work, while feeling pressure to devote themselves to their children. Like Frida, the women Hays studied point out ways that they prioritize caring for their children while still working: "It is just these sorts of concerns that leave paid working mothers feeling inadequate and ambivalent about their position" (Hays, 1996, p. 140). Trying to balance the demands of parenting a toddler with working, Frida leaves her daughter home alone for a couple of hours to retrieve some files from her office. This is the ultimate bad action that causes Friday to be labeled a bad mother and potentially lose all custody of Harriet. Although Igel contends that "Frida is punished though, because her desire to complete her work overcame her desire to take care of her daughter" (2024, p. 88), I disagree with

this interpretation of Chan's novel. Considered in the context of intensive mothering, Frida does not leave her daughter because she enjoys her work or prioritizes it above her daughter. Unlike Marla, Frida finds mothering more fulfilling than her career and claims that she maintains the job entirely because she must do so to support herself and Harriet.

In *The School for Good Mothers,* Chan presents the issue of race as identity marker of a bad mother in U.S. culture. At the school Frida stands out because she is the only Asian American, while the rest of the group is primarily composed of African American and Latin American women, which is largely representative of the prison population of women in the United States today. As Kiera V. Williams points out, "If 'good mothers' are portrayed as white and middle class, then women who do not fit these categories – minority and working-class mothers, for instance – are often represented as a priori unfit or, at least, dysfunctional mothers" (2017, p. 256). Frida reveals the prevalence of this view when she expresses little surprise at seeing most of the participants: "She catalogs the mothers by age and race, as she imagines the state does, as she always does when she suspects she's the only" (Chan, 2022, p. 80). The reader quickly learns that many of the women have been sent to the school because of perceived neglect or harm to their children, but the older, middle-class white women have been sent to the school because of perceived hovering or parenting too much, while many of the minority mothers are presented as neglecting or abandoning their children.

Bad Mothers Learning to be Good

Although both Marla and Frida become bad mothers by abandoning their daughters, they both eventually attempt to change the perception of themselves as good/responsible mothers, who are fit to mother their own children. Marla is absent from her daughter, Beatrice, for several years; she decides to return home when she discovers that Alex and Beatrice are living on their own. Frida, on the other hand, did not attempt to permanently abandon her daughter, Harriet. Thus, the entire novel centers around her attempts to become a socially acceptable mother (Igel, 2024). As noted by 't Hart (2024), Cummins Wiant (2024), and Ennis (2014) intensive mothering has become so deeply engrained in the culture of motherhood that permeates the United States. Both *When Women Were Dragons* and *The School for Good Mothers* provide examples of bad mothers' attempts to question the ideal of good mother by adhering to the tenets of intensive mothering in unconventional ways.

After several years away from her family, Marla and several of her dragon friends return and attempt to form a family with Alex and Beatrice. The dragons decide to return in an attempt to reunite with their families (Barnhill, 2022, p. 269). While Marla returns because she recognizes that Alex and Beatrice no longer have a mother who cares for them, Alex is quite resistant at first because she feels Marla's abandonment makes her no longer fit to mother Beatrice. As her attempts to raise both herself and Beatrice become overwhelming, Alex feels "*so angry*. At my mother. At her cancer. At my father. At his abandonment. And I was so angry at my aunt. For leaving my mother. For leaving Bea-

trice. For leaving *me.* Because I needed her" (Barnhill, 2022, p. 203, italics in original). While Alex attempts to reject Marla's return, she ultimately accepts the dragons when she realizes that the banding together of women in becoming dragons provides the community as a relief to the isolation she has always felt (*ibid*., p. 291).

Alex changes her beliefs about dragons and reluctantly accepts the assistance of the dragons in caring for Beatrice, which gives her the freedom to pursue her dreams. In a conversation with Marla, Alex admits that "'She's your daughter, Marla... It's time she understands what you've suffered, and what you gave up, and how much you loved her. She's your *daughter*, Marla. And so am I. You're just as much a mother to me as my own mother was" (Barnhill, 2022, p. 341, italics in original). While Marla and her dragon friends, including her partner, Edith, become mothers to Beatrice (who eventually dragons) and Alex, neither of the young women chooses motherhood. While she witnesses women all around her who hear the call and become dragons, Alex must reckon with the reality that she does not. She feels that she must not be magical. As an alternate history, Marla and her community of dragons return and are accepted as good mothers primarily because they relieve men from the burden of caring for children again. By reassuming the responsibility for childcare, the mother dragons allow the status quo of intensive mothering to persist, albeit on their own terms using their dragon powers.

In *The School for Good Mothers*, the school is used to demonstrate how society uses feelings of judgment and guilt to police the behavior of women as mothers. The school operates by employing intensive motherhood, which "is a disciplining discourse in which mothers share the 'responsibility' for policing themselves with each 'audience' with which they interact" (Cummins, 2024, p. 453). The all-female teachers at the school repeatedly emphasize that mothering should come naturally but then prescribe exactly what constitutes natural mothering. At the school, Frida is taught that "Bad parents must be transformed from the inside out. The right instincts, the right feelings, the ability to make split-second, safe, nurturing, loving decisions" (Chan, 2022, p. 83). Frida agrees that good mothers make safe, nurturing, and loving decisions for their children and typically put their children's safety and well-being ahead of their own. However, she does not agree with how the school attempts to teach these aspects of motherhood.

Since the school is offered as the only way that Frida can attempt to regain custody of Harriet, she at first acquiesces to the tactics employed by the school to train the women to be good mothers. The primary dystopian/futuristic aspect of the school is the use of robotic children to train mothers. Each mother is assigned a doll who resembles their own child's age and ethnicity so that "in addition to their role as proxy children, the dolls will collect data. They'll gauge the mothers' love" (2022, p. 102). Throughout the novel, the school emphasizes that the mothers must not only learn to perform the actions of a good mother, but also the emotions of care that demonstrate love for their children. The implication is that it is lack of love for their children that motivates the actions that cause the women to be labeled bad mothers. Hays argues that parenting experts view women as "irrational and emotional, but they also implied that, with careful expert guidance, it might be possible to educate them" (1996, p. 40). The stated goal of the program is to

train mothers to have correct emotions that cause them to behave like good mothers who embrace the tenets of intensive mothering. Although at first Frida is anxious to succeed at the school, she finds herself consistently failing. This failure causes her to be reminded that she "is a bad mother because her hugs convey anger. She is a bad mother because her affection is perfunctory" (Chan, 2022, p. 129). Using the robot doll, Frida's degree of affection for her own child is determined to be unacceptable, which she finds extremely discouraging as she attempts to complete the program successfully.

Should the Bad Mother be Redeemed?

The conclusions of both *When Women Were Dragons* and *The School for Good Mothers* present a judgment on the ability of bad mothers to recover their status as good mothers who should care for their own children. In Barnhill's novel the dragons and the girls form a feminist community that is quite idealistic and reminiscent of the kinds of feminist communities imagined by second wave feminism. Barnhill chooses to offer a hopeful vision of a world in which women and dragons form a supportive community at the end of *When Women Were Dragons*. While Marla is welcomed back by Alex and Beatrice as a mother, even in her dragon form, in *The School for Good Mothers*, Frida is unable to meet the demands of intensive mothering as dictated by the school and ultimately loses custody of Harriet permanently.

The final chapter of *When Women Were Dragons* focuses on the difference when young dragon girls are accepted by their families and communities rather than ostracized. This is such a hopeful ending to the novel. However, I think it is important to note that during the Mass Dragoning, the women who transformed seemed to be primarily wives and mothers who left their families and communities when they became dragons. These women, primarily white and middle class, are deemed bad mothers because of their abandonment of their families. As reproductive justice argues, women who appear to be good mothers because of identity markers, are represented as bad mothers when they abandon their mothering duties (Solinger and Ross, 2017). The women who became dragons are welcomed back in part because their initial departure left a caregiving hole. Although the women (dragons) return to their former roles as mothers, the unconventional family that Marla forms offers an alternative to the patriarchal family structure. Throughout *The School for Good Mothers,* Frida's failure to live up to the expectations of intensive mothering serves as the primary reason she is sent to the school. While the women in the novel sometimes show support for each other in the school through acts of solidarity or standing up for each other, once they are reminded that these acts of defiance could jeopardize their relationship with their own children, they prioritize motherhood over feminist community. At times, Frida compares herself to the other mothers in an effort to improve her view of herself as a mother. 'T Hart (2024) and Douglas and Michaels (2004) point out that women often use the stereotype of the bad mother, to compare themselves to other mothers. According to Douglas and Michaels, women "suddenly (if briefly) felt very confident and virtuous when juxtaposed to this other, bad mother" (2004, p. 199).

Before the end of the year-long program, Frida realizes that she and the other mothers will always fail because their identity markers are ultimately the reason they have been deemed bad mothers. Rather than embracing the opportunity for solidarity presented by the concept of reproductive justice (Solinger and Ross, 2017), Frida and the other mothers grow increasingly isolated and ultimately fail to defeat the school by completing the program successfully.

Conclusion

As speculative fictions, these two novels question intensive mothering in the United States. While Marla and Frida are both judged to be bad mothers because of the actions they take when society fails to support their unique circumstances as mothers, their lack of conformity to intensive motherhood ultimately leads to the abandonment of their daughters. The differences between *When Women Were Dragons* as alternate history, which rewrites the past, and *The School for Good Mothers*, which predicts a possible dystopian future, are most apparent in their endings. While Barnhill's novel may provide the reader with a more hopeful ending, Chan's fiction reckons with realities that more closely resemble the current motherhood ideology that pervades the United States.

The ending of *When Women Were Dragons* provides a hopeful possibility for feminism and the future but does so primarily by overlooking some intersectional aspects of women's experience (Hill Collins, 1990). Barnhill appears to represent 1950s and 1960s America as a middle-class white society. Second-wave feminism is frequently criticized for its failure to address intersectionality. For instance, *When Women Were Dragons* chooses to focus on issues of queerness rather than by acknowledging the Civil Rights movement taking place in the United States at the time (Coontz, 1992). Marla's lesbian identity is part of her unacceptability as a woman and a mother initially. However, when she returns to help Alex and resume her role as Beatrice's mother, Barnhill represents their new family as an inclusive queer community. As a rewriting of second-wave feminist history in the United States, *When Women Were Dragons* accepts a white-washed view of history.

Unlike *When Women Were Dragons*, *The School for Good Mothers* does raise issues of intersectionality. Frida is quick to recognize the disproportionate number of African American and Latina women who are in the school and is aware that she is the only Asian American mother (Kawash, 2011). As Jennifer Cho points out, "Not only is reading Asian Americans as an exemplary model minority...divisive among People of Colour but it also misinterprets Asian Americans' power as their own" (2025, p. 4). At first, Frida is aligned with the white mothers as the women self-segregate socially because of her model minority status, but eventually she seems to move somewhat fluidly among the groups. Frida is also aware that the school embraces intensive mothering while overlooking the systems that force the women of color into the category of bad mothers.

In conclusion, in both novels the female protagonists feel overwhelmed by the pressures and responsibility of intensive motherhood. This leads them to abandon their children in either a fantastic way, as when Marla and the other women become dragons and fly away

from their families or in a disastrous way, as when Frida leaves her toddler daughter at home alone for a few hours, which leads to her permanent separation from the child. Women in the U.S. today often feel similarly overwhelmed by the responsibility of motherhood without community or government support. For instance, it is not uncommon for women to return to work within six weeks of giving birth, while still recovering. These two novels provide a conflicting perspective on motherhood. In *When Women Were Dragons,* white women like Marla and Beatrice feel that the life that has been prescribed to them is too small. The only way they can outgrow this life is through becoming dragons and choosing to forsake motherhood, while in *The School for Good Mothers*, the mothers fear the scrutiny they experience will result in losing their children, which is what ultimately happens to Frida. As we anticipate the increasingly extreme rhetoric voiced by the newly elected President of the United States and the plans of Project 2025 (National Partnership for Women and Families, 2025), the bleak dystopian future portrayed in *The School for Good Mothers* appears to be a more realistic portrayal of contemporary motherhood in the United Sates than the inclusive society of *When Women Were Dragons.*

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