

Orientalism in *Dune*

A literary analysis of the use of Orientalism and Orientalist tropes in Frank Herbert's *Dune*

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Table of Contents

- I.** Introduction
- II.** Constructing the Dialectic in a Technologically Backward Universe
 - a. Neo-Feudalism
 - b. The Spacing Guild
- III.** The Fremen
 - a. Fremen Society
 - b. The Sandworm
- IV.** Corruption of the Fremen
 - a. Corruption by Liet Kynes
 - b. Corruption by the Bene Gesserit and Paul the Messiah
- V.** Conclusion
- VI.** Bibliography

I. Introduction

“You begin by creating an understandable human/humanoid/sentient in an alien culture and right there, even though you may not intend it, you will reflect in some way the current human condition on Planet Earth.”—Frank Herbert¹

Frank Herbert’s 1965 *Dune* is among the most influential science fiction novels of the 20th century. Denis Villeneuve’s recent movie adaptation in 2021, *Dune*, and 2023, *Dune Part Two* follow the similar positive receptions Herbert’s *Dune* received nearly 60 years ago. The universe of *Dune* places humanity 20,000 years into the future on distant planets;² however, Herbert spends most of his focus on the planet of Arrakis,³ otherwise known as Dune. The novel *Dune* is renowned for its epic worldbuilding, whether it be the vivid descriptions of the planets or the expansive socio-political structures and histories of the universe. In investigating his worldbuilding techniques it is interesting to consider that Herbert himself believed it “will reflect in some way the current human condition on Planet Earth.” Therefore, from the worldbuilding of *Dune*, it is possible to examine Herbert’s view on the human condition.

Instead of envisioning humanity 20,000 years in the future to be highly advanced in its technology, philosophy, and institutions, Herbert portrays a galactic empire, the Imperium, which successfully spread its reach over many planets,⁴ yet whose institutions and philosophy resemble more those of historical Western civilizations rather than a futuristic society. This rejection of modernity is not uncommon in science fiction and notably present in the works of some of the

¹ Frank Herbert, “Men on Other Planets,” in *The Craft of Science Fiction*, ed. Reginald Bretnor (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 122.

² Specifically, Duke Leto I lived from 10,140-10,191 AG. AG is for “After Guild,” which represents their monopoly over interstellar travel. Herbert marks AG as 11,000 AD, making the events of *Dune* occur in 21,190 AD or about 20,000 years in the future. Frank Herbert, *Dune*, Ace Premium Edition (New York: Berkley, 2010), Kindle edition, 829.

³ Frank Herbert defines “Arrakis” as “The planet known as Dune; third planet of Canopus.” Frank Herbert, *Dune*, 834.

⁴ The exact range of the Imperium’s control in terms of planets and population is not distinctly mentioned in *Dune*.

foundational authors of the genre like Edgar Rice Burroughs in his 1912-1941 *Barsoom* series. His series follows a confederate soldier, John Carter, as a chivalric knight who is spontaneously transported to Mars and conquers it. Despite framing his setting with technology beyond modern comprehension, Burroughs imagines his plot and setting as a Neo-Chivalric Romance. In constructing his world, Edgar Rice Burroughs adapts influences from real peoples and cultures to establish his alien races. His ethnography is essential to the construction of the plot, relying on broad generalizations and essentialist views about the practices and abilities of each race. Burroughs was largely unconcerned with the political implications of his writing and the accuracy of the representations from the elements he borrowed from history. His plot in *A Princess of Mars* is simplistic and sees John Carter defeat the forces of evil and save the princess, Deja Thoris, his damsel in distress. Burroughs pictures Mars as an infinite sand planet inhabited by savages and warring kingdoms. There is evidence that Burroughs was largely motivated by the financial gain of writing the *Barsoom* series and that his primary objective was to construct a world and inhabitants that appealed to his early 20th century American audience. In reflecting on writing his other famous series *Tarzan*, he stated, “I had gone thoroughly through some of the all-fiction magazines and I made up my mind that if people were paid for writing such rot as I read I could write stories just as rotten.”⁵ Some of these essentialized and generalized elements are also present in *Dune* and can be analyzed within the framework of Orientalism.⁶ Elements like the infinite/mysterious desert, exoticism, and technological backwardness are present at the surface level of these works. Burroughs’ *Barsoom* series is then

⁵ Edgar Rice Burroughs, “How I Wrote the Tarzan Books,” *The Washington Post & New York World Sunday Supplement – The World Magazine*, October 27, 1929.

⁶ Tarzan, although not science fiction, has also been extensively studied through the lens of post-colonial discourse. Burroughs is a controversial figure in the realm of postcolonial discourse, but the racial ethnography as well as the traditional ‘white savior’ and ‘going native’ tropes are notably Orientalist.

a useful foundational work in which many of these elements can be easily demonstrated. In contrast, Herbert is unique within this genre of Neo-Chivalric-Romance in his intentionality of worldbuilding the universe of *Dune*. Similarly, in his article in “Men on Other Planets,” he is acutely aware of worldbuilding’s reflection on “the current human condition on Planet Earth.”⁷

Orientalism, coined in its modern form by Palestinian American Edward Said’s 1978 *Orientalism*, has become a popular framework for post-colonial literary criticism since it was first published. It is necessary to mention that Said published his work thirteen years after Herbert originally published *Dune* in 1965. Regardless, it remains interesting to ask: was Herbert and by extension *Dune* Orientalist? To begin this investigation, it is important to understand the extent of Said’s definition of Orientalism and the historical context in which Herbert wrote *Dune*.

In *Orientalism*, Said argues that Western writers and thinkers have long constructed the East as exotic, mysterious, and inferior in order to justify domination and control. Said primarily structures his view of Orientalism based on what he calls the “Near-Orient,” which broadly encompasses the geographic regions of Northern Africa and the Middle East, and is associated with Arab, Bedouin, Berber peoples, as well as Islamic religion and philosophy. Said claims that, over the past millennia, the West, referring generally to White Christian Europe, has fabricated a warped image of the Orient that is based on mysticism, exoticism, and technological backwardness. Said encompasses these ideas in what he calls “Imaginative Geography.” Essentially, in the mind of Western thought and subsequent literature there is a constructed Orient that does not exist in actuality.⁸ This imagined geography then allows the West to project their own ideas of Orientalism onto the Orient through a given aesthetic and essentialized tropes. It is easy to see the connection here to what Herbert claims in his essay “Men on Other Planets.”

⁷ Frank Herbert, “Men on Other Planets,” 122.

⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 201–225.

Said states that “Imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away.”⁹ He argues that the imagined geography of the Orient is already seeded within Western literary tradition and allows the Western reader to associate Oriental aesthetics with the themes of mysticism, exoticism, and importantly technological backwardness.

More specifically these ideas manifest themselves in recurring tropes like “going native,” the “noble savage,” and the “white savior complex,” which are not uncommonly used together. In *A Princess of Mars*, these tropes are easily identified. The going native trope is particularly evident, as the protagonist, John Carter, assimilates into the indigenous people, the Tharks, and quickly “out-natives-the-native,” by proving his superior martial ability. In this trope, the natives are almost always depicted as “noble savages,” where their philosophies and cause are illustrated as good and noble despite their “barbaric” appearance. As John Carter assimilates into the highly alien and primitivist Tharks, he quickly surpasses the natives in skill and earns their loyalty. He then proceeds to unite rival Thark tribes and assembles his army. The Thark society, who prize strength and honor through violence, are illustrated as primitive, but through their Chieftain Tars Tarkas they are shown to be fiercely loyal and noble, especially when led by John Carter. Burroughs essentializes the primitive, nomadic inhabitants of the mystic desert of Mars and proves the strength of the chivalric outsider. This is compounded by the white savior complex, which is commonly associated with these tropes when the protagonist going native is white and becomes their soteric hero. Throughout the *Barsoom* series, Burroughs consistently centers the plot around John Carter either liberating Mars from some existential threat or saving his love interest, the Princess. This portrays Mars and the princess as helpless characters that must be

⁹ Ibid, 55.

saved by the hero, John Carter.¹⁰ These tropes also occur in *Dune*, but with important nuances. These are the tropes and ideas that Said actively protests and critiques in his analysis of ‘Western’ fiction, but he only very loosely and generally defines what he means by ‘Western.’

Understanding Herbert as an Orientalist means engaging with a broader critique of Orientalism as a framework of knowledge. Said has faced criticism for utilizing the same practices that he condemned in Western authors. Said critiques the Western intellectual tradition which has historically portrayed the East as a place of mysticism, exoticism, and technological backwardness. However, as a scholar participating in academic debate and a product of Western tradition, he must include elements from the same literary and philosophical traditions that added to the creation of these stereotypes. This contradiction highlights a significant tension in postcolonial studies. Postcolonial scholars like Said critique the colonial and imperialist structures of knowledge, while they have to work within those same structures to make their arguments. This shows the difficulty of rejecting the dominant cultural frameworks that have shaped global academic discourse.¹¹ It is easy to find counterpoints to the broadscale generalizations that Said makes about Western culture. Besides the diversity in what is considered Western or Occidental, there are notable periods and figures regarded as part of the West who were deeply engaged with what Said calls the Orient. In example, during different times, both Rome and the post-Alexandrian Hellenic states blended Western and Eastern influences. Similarly, Said spends very little time nuancing his argument for anything that goes beyond just the “Near East.” Said instead attempts to construct Occidental and Oriental as a

¹⁰ Edgar Rice Burroughs, *A Princess of Mars* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991).

¹¹ Shehla Burney, “Orientalism: The Making of the Other,” in *Pedagogy of the Other: Edward Said, Postcolonial Theory, and Strategies for Critique, Counterpoints*, vol. 417 (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 23–27, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42981698>.

binary.¹² This is effective but ignores necessary nuance. Hence, there is a notable difference between Orientalist and simply Eastern.

Orientalism or Orientalist in the context of science fiction and specifically Herbert's *Dune* is the intentional or unintentional use of generalized and essentialized tropes from the "Imaginative Geography" of the "Orient" that portray the setting, ethnography, and characters as exotic, mystic, or technologically backwards. Similarly, Near Eastern and Western are defined as the use of real elements of religion, culture, and philosophy that are used to inspire the setting, practices, and characters.

It is important to understand how Herbert uses these tropes and aesthetics to explore the many facets of his universe. The most straightforward approach is to start with his allusions to Islam and the Near East through his semantics and explore adjacent themes and aesthetics. As Paul Atreides¹³ arrives on Arrakis, Herbert illustrates: "On that first day when Muad'Dib rode through the streets of Arrakeen with his family, some of the people along the way recalled the legends and the prophecy and they ventured to shout: 'Mahdi!' But their shout was more a question than a statement, for as yet they could only hope he was the one foretold as the Lisan al-Gaib, the Voice from the Outer World."¹⁴ This passage alone reveals many of the Orientalist elements that Herbert uses in *Dune*. All three of the names used to refer to Paul are of Arabic and even Islamic origin. "Mahdi," is an Islamic term that refers to the Messianic savior that will come at the end of time. The "Mahdi" is also in reference to actual historical Muslim claimants

¹² Burney, *Orientalism: The Making of the Other*, 26.

¹³ Donal E. Palumbo defines "Paul Atreides" as "Son of Duke Leto Atreides and Lady Jessica, and the grandson on his mother's side of Baron Vladimir Harkonnen and Tanidia Nerus, a Bene Gesserit. He spent the first fifteen years of his life on Caladan." See Donald E. Palumbo, *A Dune Companion: Characters, Places and Terms in Frank Herbert's Original Six Novels* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2018), 66.

¹⁴ Frank Herbert, *Dune* (New York: Berkley, 2010), Kindle edition, eBook ISBN 9781101658055, 67.

of this title, who claimed to be bringers of the end times.¹⁵ Renowned 14th century Muslim historian Ibn-Khaldun,¹⁶ noted in his *The Muqaddimah* that Mahdi claimants usually coincided with the forceful unification of regional groups.¹⁷ By satisfying the prophecies, they wielded significant and overzealous power.¹⁸ This is exactly what Paul achieves when he begins to satisfy the prophecies of the Mahdi. Here Herbert is simply referencing Near-Eastern history and philosophy to give interesting analytical insight into Paul's character and trajectory. Similarly, the "Lisan al-Gaib" "Voice from the Outer World," is also of Arabic origin: lisan means "tongue," Gaib means "invisible."¹⁹ This is in clear reference to his supernatural ability to persuade and inspire his followers. Accompanying the Islamic analogies embedded in the etymology of his names, the aesthetic of Paul being welcomed by chanting evokes the image of Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.²⁰ These allusions gesture toward Messianic motifs found across Abrahamic traditions, though each interprets them differently. The imagery is deliberately generalized and Orientalized as Herbert, here, and throughout the book, does not ascribe Paul's Messianic nature to any religion, instead, he seems to take elements from all three major monotheistic Abrahamic religions. Herbert does this intentionally to not have his Messiah mirror any specific religion and to show that he is the Messiah for both the Bene

¹⁵ Refers the historical events related to the Mahdist War in Sudan between 1881 and 1889. In contrast to the historical case, where a British officer, General Gordon, is sent to Khartoum to suppress a rebellion, in *Dune*, the foreigner is actually considered to be the Mahdi and leads it. Jacob Frank, *The Orientalist Semiotic of Dune: Religious and Historical References within Frank Herbert's Universe* (Büchner, 2022), 72.

¹⁶ Ibn Khaldun was of immense importance to the Islamic world for his pioneering work in history, anthropology and sociology.

¹⁷ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), Section 51.

¹⁸ Payam Mohseni and Mohammad Sagha, *The Hidden Imam and the End of Time: A Primer on the Mahdi, Islamic Theology, and Global Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs, Harvard Divinity School, 2022), accessed February 7, 2025, https://shiism.hds.harvard.edu/sites/g/files/omnuum3186/files/shiism-global-affairs/files/the_hidden_imam_and_the_end_of_time_-_a_primer_on_the_mahdi_islamic_theology_and_global_politics_04.pdf.

¹⁹ Kara Kennedy, "Epic Worldbuilding: Names and Cultures in *Dune*," *Names* 64, no. 2 (2016): 101.

²⁰ Kara Kennedy, *Frank Herbert's Dune: A Critical Companion* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 27.

Gesserit²¹ (Kwisatz Haderach) and the Fremmen²² (Lisan al-Gaib). Finally, the name Muad'Dib, is Paul's chosen name, which is the name of an in-universe small desert mouse known for its ability to preserve water (a reference to how water is equated to life).²³ Muad'Dib also means the "pointer of the way" in Arabic, which is referencing his prescience and his status as the Messiah. It is also the name that he becomes known by to the Harkonnens²⁴ and the Emperor when he gains infamy for leading the Fremmen resistance against them. Becoming known by Muad'Dib to his enemies is indicative of integration with the Fremmen and marks his complete integration within its society. Kara Kennedy posits that "Paul's multiple names are a powerful reflection of his changing attitudes and roles within Fremmen society, and the extent to which he is willing to "go native" in order to achieve power."²⁵ Although Herbert sets up the going native trope, he ultimately undermines it when Paul becomes the false Messiah.

In *Dune*, Herbert deliberately constructs his universe with Orientalist undertones, not necessarily to reinforce the power dynamics Said critiques, but to suggest a familiar aesthetic and tropes that situate the reader in an alien, yet familiar world. These Orientalist elements contribute to the worldbuilding of *Dune*, which Herbert proceeds to systematically undercut. Herbert's deliberate departure from technological progress immediately places *Dune* within the Neo-Chivalric Romance genre, which lends itself towards Orientalist generalizations as seen with Burroughs. Many of the worldbuilding elements of *Dune* are presented in his opening scene, the

²¹ Frank Herbert defines "Bene Gesserit" as "The ancient school of mental and physical training established primarily for female students after the Butlerian Jihad destroyed the so-called "thinking machines" and robots. See Herbert, *Dune*, 835.

²² Frank Herbert defines "Fremmen" as "Free tribes of Arrakis, dwellers in the desert, remnants of the Zensunni Wanderers. ("Sand Pirates" according to the Imperial Dictionary.)" See Herbert, *Dune*, 841.

²³ Donald E. Palumbo, *A Dune Companion: Characters, Places and Terms in Frank Herbert's Original Six Novels* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2018), 135.

²⁴ Donald E. Palumbo defines "Harkonnens" as "Sworn enemies of the Atreides, ruled Arrakis under a CHOAM company contract from 10,111 to 10,191." See Palumbo, *A Dune Companion*, 102.

²⁵ Kennedy, "Epic Worldbuilding", 104.

Gom Jabbar. Here, Herbert sets the stage and illustrates the importance of Arrakis by introducing the Imperium as a Feudal structure reminiscent of Medieval Europe. The scene frames the dialectic between the Occidental Imperium and the Orientalized Fremen in an essentialized way, portraying the Imperium as driven by conquest and expansionism, while portraying the Fremen as ascetic and religious. While this construct mirrors Orientalist binaries, Herbert approaches them with nuance. He draws on Islamic motifs and desert imagery not just for exotic effect, but to examine complex questions of religion, ecology, philosophy, and human purpose. Herbert initially introduces the Fremen as the noble savage, depicting their beliefs and practices as far more sustainable than those of the Imperium, and their warriors far stronger. However, he ultimately undermines all of these Orientalist constructions by letting Paul become the false Messiah who corrupts the morally just Fremen into committing horrific acts, which are exactly opposed to the practices Herbert praises them for. By doing this Herbert dispels Paul as the white savior and the Fremen as the noble savages. Throughout the novel Herbert repeatedly humanizes and un-essentializes the peoples and organizations within *Dune*. He blends nuance and ambiguity to allow his readers to question their morality.

Many other authors have weighed in on the assessment of Orientalism in *Dune*. They arrive at different conclusions. Notable perspectives include Kara Kennedy, who has a mixed opinion: “the narrative can also be criticized for containing an Orientalist perspective”²⁶ however, she believes that Paul represents that the “West and East might be able to be reconciled or re-envisioned beyond the Middle Eastern stereotypes that Edward Said critiques.”²⁷ Harris Durrani, another notable critic within the scholarship of *Dune*, claims that “Herbert’s profound “Muslimness” ... goes beyond mere orientalist aesthetics.” “Muslimness is embedded in its

²⁶ Ibid, 99.

²⁷ Ibid, 104.

underlying structure and themes, and not relegated to the surface of the text.”²⁸ Jacob Frank is far more critical of Herbert: “Herbert’s creation of a new world was less progressive than the anti-colonial tones of his work” “Herbert consequently continues orientalist semiotics, which juxtaposes the Fremmen as an exotic Other with the Western, ruling-class Atreides family.” “It seems more likely that Herbert was very sensitively crafting linguistic meanings for his figures, which is why the orientalist semiotics of the overall work can hardly be considered orientalist by accident.”²⁹ There is certainly an agreement that Herbert uses Orientalism in his worldbuilding and plot, but nuance is needed to understand the extent to which Herbert employs it and to what end.

Herbert’s worldbuilding in *Dune* is undeniably shaped by Orientalist aesthetics and tropes, even for those who are not intimately familiar with the text or Orientalism as a concept. Although Said’s *Orientalism* offers a useful lens for examining the Near-Eastern influences on Herbert’s text, he is largely exempt from the broadscale accusations Said makes on Western writers. His use of Islamic and Arab terminology, themes, and motifs is not only linguistic embellishment or a device to create an exotic setting, but a complex and layered conversation with these cultural traditions. Analyzing the historical connotations and etymology of his extensive terminology reveals compelling insights into his broader commentary. Herbert’s application of Orientalist aesthetics works on two essential levels: first to evoke the “familiar alien” through mysticism, exoticism, and perceived technological backwardness and second, as a means of subverting those very tropes.

²⁸ Durrani Haris, “The Muslimness of Dune: A Close Reading of 'Appendix II: The Religion of Dune,’” Reactor Mag, October 18, 2021, <https://reactormag.com/the-muslimness-of-dune-a-close-reading-of-appendix-ii-the-religion-of-dune/>.

²⁹ Jacob Frank, *The Orientalist Semiotic of Dune: Religious and Historical References within Frank Herbert’s Universe* (Büchner, 2022), 67–71.

II. Constructing the Dialectic in a Technologically Backward Universe

Herbert's initial worldbuilding is dedicated to situating the reader in a familiar alien world and creating the traditional Orientalist binary by evoking traditional Orientalist aesthetics and tropes. Specifically, he emphasizes the idea of technological backwardness to Orientalize his universe. He places great importance on this in his opening scene where Paul undergoes the Gom Jabbar, to test if he is in fact the Messiah. Herbert uses the Reverend Mother³⁰ to construct the necessary knowledge of the *Dune* universe and its codified reversion of technology through the Butlerian Jihad. He intentionally keeps many of the details vague and relies on Orientalism to give context to his readers. Kara Kennedy explains this worldbuilding technique: "The new cultures and names in a work of science fiction play a significant role in how readers understand the secondary world and its relation to their own world. If an author can produce changes in the nominal and cultural realms that gesture towards an even larger, more expansive, universe than is described in the story, worldbuilding can successfully set up the illusion of completeness and allow readers' pre-existing knowledge to fill in the gaps."³¹ Herbert relies on this idea heavily to build his plot and advance his storyline through preconceived character arcs and tropes he believes to be familiar to the reader. Herbert continues to expand his worldbuilding throughout the novel and notably in his appendices at the end of *Dune*, however. He uses the ideas of neo-Feudalism and Occidental generalizations to build the Orientalist binary between the Imperium and the Fremen.

³⁰ Donald E. Palumbo defines "Reverend Mother" as "Member of the Bene Gesserit or a Fremen Sayyadina who has elevated herself to a higher state of consciousness and awareness through having successfully ingested and transmuted the Water of Life, a spice derivative that is fatal to those who cannot successfully transmute it." See Palumbo, *A Dune Companion*, 152.

³¹ Kennedy, "Epic Worldbuilding," 100.

Neo-Feudalism

Herbert's regression of the vaguely 'Western' Imperium to neo-Feudalism is important for worldbuilding the Saidian binary between Occident and Orient, but it also serves as a source of conflict in the advancement of his plot. In his appendices, Herbert goes into detail explaining the philosophy and origin of the Imperium and its complex institutions. Herbert clearly essentializes the ideas of what it means to be 'Western.' In his semantics, he uses names and ideas from Ancient Greek, Christian, Russian, English, German, French traditions, among others, which allows Herbert to build an essentialized Occidental Imperium. He uses the conflation of these cultures to create a general criticism of Western philosophies, institutions, and practices, which Herbert identifies primarily with expansionism and greed. Herbert deliberately characterizes the Imperium as an unsustainable organization of society because of its reliance on a delicate balance of power that is motivated by conquest and greed.

Herbert's first scene with the Reverend Mother Gaius Mohiam and Paul Atreides exposes the history and worldbuilding of *Dune*. The Gom Jabbar is an ordeal administered to initiates of the Bene Gesserit Order to test their control over their own mind. In Paul's test, he is subjected to placing his hand in a box that induces immense pain, with the punishment of withdrawing his hand meaning death by a poison tipped needle. The Reverend Mother uses the ordeal to inform Paul of his Messianic prophecy within the historical context of the Imperium. Shortly after the ordeal, Paul asks the Reverend Mother "Why do you test for humans?" "To set you free." "Free?" "Once, men turned their thinking over to machines in the hope that this would set them free. But that only permitted other men with machines to enslave them." "Thou shalt not make a machine in the likeness of a man's mind," ... "But what the O.C. Bible should've said is: 'Thou

shalt not make a machine to counterfeit a *human* mind.”³² What is most notable here is Herbert’s introduction of the universe’s history and religious framework. Clearly from the semantics of both the Bene Gesserit³³ and the O.C. Bible³⁴ it is easy to understand that the central religious beliefs and texts originate from Western Catholic Christian ideals. The idea of it specifically being purported by a sisterhood akin to an order of nuns and specifically being the Catholic bible hone ideas of Catholicism: conservatism and large hierarchical institutions.³⁵ The central tenant of this religious text is the rejection of technology. The Butlerian Jihad and institution of the O.C. Bible reflects a violent and structural shift away from technological advancement. The Reverend Mother connects this reversion from technology to ideas of humanity and freedom, which she considers an existential priority based on her tone.

The term “Butlerian Jihad³⁶” can also be dissected to reveal Herbert’s intentions. It is evident that the inspirational Butler is actually Victorian author Samuel Butler, who wrote *Erewhon*, a Victorian satire that warned of the development of machines and mechanical consciousness. In *Erewhon*, he writes a series of chapters called the “Book of the Machines.” He explains that “There is no security against the ultimate development of mechanical consciousness.”³⁷ Butler’s ideas were radical to the early years of the Industrial Revolution and was no doubt Herbert’s inspiration for the naming of the Butlerian Jihad. Alluding to Butler and his time period, also invokes ideas of the infamous Luddites, who took up violence against the

³² Herbert, *Dune*, 17.

³³ Referred in scholarship many times as coming from “Benevolent Jesuit.” See Jacob Frank 67-68.

³⁴ Frank Herbert defines “Orange Catholic Bible” as “The ‘Accumulated Book,’ the religious text produced by the Commission of Ecumenical Translators. It contains elements of most ancient religions, including the Maometh Saari, Mahayana Christianity, Zensunni Catholicism and Buddislamic traditions. Its supreme commandment is: Thou shalt not disfigure the soul.” See Herbert, *Dune*, 850.

³⁵ Jacob Frank, 67-68.

³⁶ Frank Herbert defines “Butlerian Jihad (Great Revolt)” as “The crusade against computers, thinking machines, and conscious robots begun in 201 B.G. and concluded in 108 B.G.” See Herbert, *Dune*, 845.

³⁷ Samuel Butler, *Erewhon*: Chapter XXIII.

machines which they perceived to be taking their jobs.³⁸ Labeling the armed conflict a “Jihad,” also marries these ideas to Orientalism and Islam. The term Jihad gives a clear indication that this is a religious movement, but why it is a Jihad rather than Crusade is notable. It is clear that Herbert utilizes Islamic terminology to indicate a reversion from harmful technological advancement: This Orientalizes *Dune*, as Herbert is reliant on Orientalist tropes that the Islamic world is barbaric and technologically backward. Hence, themes of de-technologization can be seen associated with Oriental aesthetics throughout the book.

Herbert’s reasoning for the emergence of the neo-Feudalist Imperium is directly built off the events of the Butlerian Jihad; however, in detailing the Imperium’s history he also reveals his central criticism of the Occidental half of the Saidian binary. In his Appendix II: The Religion of Dune, he explains that one of the main reasons for the emergence of the current state of the Imperium and its religion is:

“SPACE TRAVEL!”³⁹

That is how Herbert emphasizes the importance of space travel on the construction of the political and religious landscape of the Imperium. He explains that “early space travel, although widespread, was largely unregulated, slow, and uncertain, ... poorly communicated and subject to extreme distortion”⁴⁰ for over a millennia after the Butlerian Jihad. In this context, it becomes clear why a Feudal system might have emerged: unreliable communication and difficult travel across vast distances in the universe naturally promote decentralization. Herbert himself explains that “The major dams against anarchy in these times were the embryo Guild ... they gave free

³⁸ Peter Hitchcock, "Resistance is Futile: The Cultural Politics of Transformation in the Digital Age," *The Comparatist*, Vol. 42 (October 2018), 304, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2653366>.

³⁹ Herbert, *Dune*, 812.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 814.

transport for all Landsraad ... business.”⁴¹ This explains how a centralizing force was able to unite the decentralized elements of the Empire while still maintaining a Feudal structure to manage the disparate worlds. Despite giving a rational explanation for the construction of the institutions of *Dune*, it allows Herbert to introduce a Feudal element of instability that allows Paul to bring the Imperium down all at once. It also gives an Occidental genealogy to the political structures of the Imperium. Much like Western Civilization it perceives itself on an evolutionary path from small disparate feuding kingdoms to a Feudal empire, eventually culminating in a centralized state by the hands of a great conqueror like Paul.

While the West often sees Feudalism as something left behind in history, Herbert envisions its resurgence in the future. The rigidity of the neo-Feudalist system is based on what Herbert calls *faufreluches*, which Herbert describes in the book as “A place for every man and every man in his place.”⁴² This is most like Western Feudalism where the entire system was underpinned by vassalage: a servitude of a lord who was ordained by God. This is clearly what Herbert is alluding to, and it similarly allows him to construct a system with the instability of Feudal systems. Herbert models the Imperium off the delicately balanced Feudal system of the Holy Roman Empire, which ruled over large swathes of modern Germany, the Benelux, Italy, Austria, Poland, and Czechia. It consisted of an Emperor that was elected by electors and maintained limited and decentralized power over the Holy Roman Empire. The structure of the Imperium also delicately balances on the relationship between the Great Houses—Atreides and Harkonnen—and the Padishah Emperors of House Corrino. The Great Houses and the Emperor

⁴¹ Ibid, 816.

⁴² Herbert, *Dune*, 840.

legislate in the Landsraad⁴³—an obviously German term to allude to the Holy Roman Empire. Its Germanic meaning—land’s council—also suggests a Feudal structure in which land (and by extension titles) is the primary currency of power within the Imperium.⁴⁴ Herbert likens the Imperium to these historical systems to identify it with the Occident, but also for the natural instability that Feudalism brings to a political system, especially one with no organized central religion. Instead, it relies more on doctrine like that of the Butlerian Jihad— “Thou shalt not make a machine in the likeness of a man’s mind”⁴⁵—and the social hierarchy of the faufreluches.

Herbert clearly condemns this reversion to Feudalism, despite making it clear that he sees a lack of technology as an inherent good. He describes in the same appendix the millions of lives lost in the struggle for political and religious structure in the Imperium. Similarly, he states, as a relic from old religious texts like Genesis, that the prevailing motivation for people of the Imperium after the Butlerian Jihad was to “Increase and multiply, and fill the *universe*, and subdue it, and rule over all manner of strange beasts and living creatures in the infinite airs, on the infinite earths and beneath them.”⁴⁶ In this “interpretation of Genesis,” Herbert criticizes the modern interpretation of human advancement to “subdue” “and rule over all” “the *universe*.” He proves this at length through Baron Harkonnen⁴⁷ and the exploitation of spice,⁴⁸ as this urge

⁴³ Donald E. Palumbo defines “Landsraad” as “The Landsraad is the union of Great houses that is one leg – with the Imperial Household and the Spacing Guild – of the political tripod maintaining the Great Convention in the 102nd century. See Palumbo, *A Dune Companion*, 121.

⁴⁴ Lorenzo DiTommaso, “History and Historical Effect in Frank Herbert’s *Dune*,” *Science Fiction Studies* 19, no. 3 (1992): 313-14, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4240179>.

⁴⁵ Herbert, *Dune*, 17.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 813.

⁴⁷ Donald E. Palumbo defines “Baron Harkonnen” as “Harkonnen, Baron Vladimir (10,110 – 10,193) – Engaged in 10,191 in a conspiracy with Emperor Shadram IV to destroy House Atreides by luring the Atreides from their secure base on Caladan to Arrakis, the former Harkonnen fief, where the Atreides would be more vulnerable. However, the Baron’s overarching goal was eventually to betray the Emperor and to place a Harkonnen on the Imperial throne.” See Palumbo, *A Dune Companion*, 101.

⁴⁸ Donald E. Palumbo defines “Spice Mélange” as “Enables Guild Navigators to pilot faster-than-light space vessels by giving them a limited power to foresee the future. It is the most valuable resource in Arrakis because it enables efficient space travel within the Imperium. It is a blue, highly alkaline byproduct of the sandworm life cycle. It is

leads humanity to colonize and exploit the “infinite earths” and the “strange beasts and living creatures.” Herbert uses this motivation as the primary reason why the Imperium becomes singularly focused on Arrakis. The Imperium’s need to expand and dominate all leads them to exploit Arrakis and its inhabitants, the Fremen, for the spice that enables the Imperium to continue this process. This is why Herbert is particularly concerned with the “strange beasts and living creatures,” as he has the Reverend Mother actively question the meaning of humanity in the Gom Jabbar with Paul at the beginning of the plot. Herbert criticizes where modern humanity draws the line of being human, especially when concerning people of other races or even aliens.

Baron Harkonnen is emblematic of this philosophy, as he embodies gluttony and strives for power in a Machiavellian⁴⁹ political strategy. Herbert describes him as “Grossly and immensely fat; and with subtle bulges beneath folds of his dark robes to reveal that all this fat was sustained partly by portable suspensors harnessed to his flesh.”⁵⁰ His physique being the product of gluttony mirrors his greedy actions. He hopes to amass wealth at the cost of any in his path, notably the Fremen, to achieve total power and destroy his archrivals the Atreides. In doing so, he exploits and subjects Arrakis totally, using slavery and violence to achieve his aims. He sees the spice as a resource to be exploited and the desert, the sandworms, and the Fremen simply as nuisances in his way. These are the characteristics that Herbert critiques within Western Imperialism. In the pursuit of Oriental riches, technology, and resources, he is willing to oppress and kill all in his way. He does not seek to understand the mysticism of Arrakis and the spice mélange it holds.

highly addictive and turns the whites of the eyes blue due to saturation of the blood when consumed in large quantities (two grams daily per seventy kilos of body weight. Prodigious consumption of mélange can extend individual life to as many as 400 years.” See Palumbo, *A Dune Companion*, 131.

⁴⁹ Machiavellianism—the view that politics is amoral and that any means however unscrupulous can justifiably be used in achieving political power. Merriam-Webster, s.v. “Machiavellianism,” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, accessed April 23, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Machiavellianism>.

⁵⁰ Herbert, *Dune*, 33.

The Harkonnen and Imperium's exploitation is also vaguely Western. Herbert constructs an elaborate Feudal political system, but when it comes to the extraction and economics of spice it is more reminiscent of European colonial ventures in Asia and more modern style corporate capitalism. The goal of the Emperor and the Great Houses is to control the flow of spice through CHOAM⁵¹, the Combine Honnete Ober Advancer Mercantiles, in which each House, depending on their influence, holds stock. Herbert admits in an interview that it is a direct allusion to our world's version of OPEC.⁵² A cartel—in *Dune* for spice instead of oil—CHOAM mirrors OPEC closely, which had only recently been established in 1960. OPEC's foundation was rooted in shifting control of oil from the occidental Anglo-American corporations to the oil-rich Middle Eastern states. Oppositely, the Imperium controls CHOAM and uses it purely for exploitative purposes. In that sense, it is reminiscent of other economic colonial charters like the British East India company. The name in turn is Occidental, as it has French (Honnete), German (Ober), and English (Combine, Advancer Mercantiles).⁵³ CHOAM acts as the primary vessel for the wealth of the Great Houses and the Emperor, who each holds stock in the company an allusion to a capitalist enterprise. CHOAM, then, sells its spice primarily to the Spacing Guild.⁵⁴ Hence, the apparatus by which spice mélange is collected and traded is vaguely Occidental. Herbert makes vague references to a Feudal and capitalist system that is governed by peoples from an array of different Western cultures. Herbert constructs the characters of the Imperium, like Baron

⁵¹ Frank Herbert defines "CHOAM" as "The universal development corporation controlled by the Emperor and Great Houses with the Guild and Bene Gesserit as silent partners. See Herbert, *Dune*, 836.

⁵² Frank Herbert, *The Maker of Dune: Insights of a Master of Science Fiction*, ed. Tim O'Reilly (New York: Berkley Books, 1987), 98.

⁵³ Combine—from English, a conglomerate or syndicate; Honnete—from French, *honnête*, meaning honest or respectable; Ober—from German, meaning upper or supreme; Advancer—from English, one who pushes forward; Mercantiles—from Latin, meaning commerce.

⁵⁴ Donald E. Palumbo defines "The Spacing Guild" as "After the Bene Dessert school, the Spacing Guild was the second mental-physical training school established following the Butlerian Jihad. The Imperial calendar begins in the year in which the Spacing Guild established its monopoly on space travel and transport." See Palumbo, *A Dune Companion*, 98.

Harkonnen, and its institutions like CHOAM as manifestations of greed in the Imperium. Demonstrating these institutions as exploitative, e also implies more morally ambiguous characters like the Atreides, who actively participate and attempt to control these avenues of power for their own gain.

The Spacing Guild

The Spacing Guild functions as a non-political entity within the Imperium that handles all space travel. Their only interaction with the Imperium is a simple transaction: spice for transportation. Their only motivation is the Oriental resource of spice, which they use as an enabler of their own technology. They use spice as a drug to temporarily gain prescience over the outcome of the paths they have set out. This process gives immense power to the Spacing Guild and places an immense importance on spice that is only found on Arrakis. The Spacing Guild not only allows for faster than light transportation across the Imperium for both political figures and their armies, but even more important is the faster-than-light communication that it enables. The Spacing Guild is able to use their large transport ships to travel through space, which conceivably is an expensive solution to this issue. In this way, the Spacing Guild's unmatched and yet mysterious ability creates a stranglehold over the politics of the Imperium.⁵⁵ The allusion of spice to oil, its origins on Arrakis, and its mysterious application as a drug all fit neatly into Orientalist tropes. Herbert purposefully does not elaborate on the operations of the Spacing Guild and only describes them as being highly addicted to spice beyond just needing it to facilitate their business. In *Dune*, the only description is of them with the emperor during Paul's conquest of Arrakis: "the eye [of the Guild member] was revealed. The man had lost one of his masking

⁵⁵ Kennedy, *Frank Herbert's Dune*, 20.

contact lenses, and the eye stared out a total blue so dark as to be almost black.”⁵⁶ It furthers the mysterious aesthetic of the Spacing Guild and emphasize their immense existential reliance on spice, as blue eyes indicate spice addiction. Not being fully integrated into the power structure of the Imperium also causes the Guild to not always operate in its best interest. Stilgar explains to Jessica that “We bribe the Guild with a monstrous payment in spice to keep our skies clear of satellites and such that none may spy what we do to the face of Arrakis.”⁵⁷ Giving the Imperium satellites over Arrakis would be disastrous for the Fremen cause, hence they are willing to sacrifice material gain to the Guild in their pursuit of their own long-term goals. This sacrifice reflects their philosophy and helps define the binary between the Imperium and the Fremen, as their main priority does not lie with profit.

III. The Fremen

Herbert presents the Fremen in his construction of the Saidian dialectic as a direct opposite of the Imperium. He uses the Fremen to present an alternative philosophy to the Occidental ideas of expansionism and domination. Herbert critiques this idea in his article “Men on Other Planets,” claiming, “One of the assumptions is that the only thing wrong with our universe is that humans have not yet invented the right machine.”⁵⁸ In staunch opposition to this idea, he constructs the Fremen as its binary opposite who are chiefly concerned with survival and spirituality. As with the Imperium, Herbert places importance on detailing the central mechanics of Fremen society and how it operates, to accurately communicate an alternative philosophy to the Imperium. It is immediately clear Herbert bases the Fremen on the Berbers of Northern

⁵⁶ Herbert, *Dune*, 755.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 470.

⁵⁸ Herbert, “Men on Other Planets”, 125.

Africa. The Berbers call themselves “Amazigh” in their native language, literally meaning “free-men.”⁵⁹ However, at times Herbert also adds extra influences from other peoples like the Bedouins, Native Americans, and Islamic philosophy. He picks and chooses from these cultures on an exotic basis for his Fremen and embeds his own philosophies and ideas of primitivism in structuring their society; however, his choice to structure the Fremen on a nomadic people deserves further nuance. Herbert goes on to systematically prove the superiority of the Fremen way and philosophy through environmental determinism: the idea that peoples and nations success and future is governed by their environment around them including resources and technology.⁶⁰ Herbert proves Fremen superiority primarily through their martial and survival abilities. In so doing, Herbert subverts the traditional view of environmental determinism, as those that face harsher environments are more likely to thrive.

Fremen Society

“Here there was a substance [water] more precious than all other—it was life itself and entwined all around with symbolism and ritual”⁶¹—Jessica⁶² after Paul’s victory over Jamis.⁶³

⁵⁹ Haifa Mahabir, "Frank Herbert's *Dune* and Orientalism," *Munitions of the Mind*, April 4, 2022, <https://blogs.kent.ac.uk/munitions-of-the-mind/2022/04/04/frank-herberts-dune-and-orientalism/>.

⁶⁰ A theory that appeared in the 19th century, was often used to explain racial differences based on geographic and environmental factors. This perspective corresponded with Darwinist ideas and was frequently invoked to justify the dominance of certain groups, particularly white populations, as ‘racially superior,’ thereby supporting systems of colonial exploitation and racial hierarchies. As in Morris Freilich, "Ecology and Culture: Environmental Determinism and the Ecological Approach in Anthropology," *Anthropological Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (Jan. 1967): 26-43.

⁶¹ Herbert, *Dune*, 510.

⁶² Donald E. Palumbo defines “Lady Jessica” as “Duke Leto Atreides’ concubine since 10,175 and the mother of Paul Atreides and Lady Alia Atreides. The unacknowledged daughter of Baron Vladimir Harkonnen and Tanidia Nerus, a Bene Gesserit, although her parentage was initially unknown to her. After having been Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam’s pupil and serving wench for fourteen years while attending the Bene Gesserit Mother School on Wallach IX, Jessica bore a son to Duke Leto despite her orders from the Bene Gesserit to give birth to a female child. See Palumbo, *A Dune Companion*, 115.

⁶³ Donald E. Palumbo defines “Jamis” as “A member of Stilgar’s Sietch Tabr and one of the forty Fremen led by Stilgar who found Paul Atreides and the Lady Jessica at Tuono Basin, in the dessert of Arrakis, after the fall of Arrakeen in 10,191.” See Palumbo, *A Dune Companion*, 114.

To Herbert the two most important elements of the Fremen culture are their asceticism and their religion. This is most effectively introduced through Paul and Jessica's first encounter with Stilgar's⁶⁴ sietch after Paul's fight with Jamis. Water is the main commodity that reflects wealth and power within Fremen society. It functions as their currency and upon which their survival depends. This concept is so far removed from the reader that Herbert illustrates this idea in a way that is also foreign to Jessica and Paul. When first reaching the Sietch Tabr, it is revealed that Jessica and Paul carried "literjons of water in it. Literjons! And us [Fremen] sipping our catchpockets the instant they show dewsparkle." Stilgar glanced at Jessica. "Is this true? Is there water in your pack?" "Yes." "Literjons of it?" "Two literjons." "What was intended with this wealth?"⁶⁵ This means that wealth, power, and cultural significance is placed on water and thus life. This is in stark opposition to the Imperium where land and wealth hold these same properties. Significantly, the main contention in letting Jessica and Paul join Stilgar's sietch is the water burden that the two adults would put on the rest of the tribe. Similarly, death is equally important. After Jamis' death Chani⁶⁶ explains that "It's the rule. The flesh belongs to the person, but his water belongs to the tribe...except in the combat ... Combat water belongs to the winner."⁶⁷ What's significant here is the tribalistic sharing of wealth. There is no private ownership as there is in the capitalistic, Feudal Imperium. Similarly, ritualistic violence is

⁶⁴ Donald E. Palumbo defines "Stilgar" as "A Fremen Naib and the leader of the Sketch Tab in 10,191, Chani's uncle, found Paul Atreides and Lady Jessica in the desert after the fall of Arrakeen in 10,191 and took them in." See Palumbo, *A Dune Companion*, 166.

⁶⁵ Herbert, *Dune*, 483- 484.

⁶⁶ Donald E. Palumbo defines "Chani" as "Stilgar's niece, Dr. Liet-Kynes' daughter and Paul Atreides' lover, elfin-faced Chani was among Stilgar's band of forty Fremen who found Paul and Lady Jessica in the desert after the fall of Arrakeen in 10,191. The woman who had appeared in Paul's prescient dreams, she was charged by Stilgar with looking after Paul's welfare during the Fremen band's consequent trek to Sietch Tabr." See Palumbo, *A Dune Companion*, 77.

⁶⁷ Herbert, *Dune*, 503.

reminiscent of primitive groups in other science fiction works like Burrough's aforementioned Tharks. It gives the aesthetic of a "savage" warrior culture.

Paul's innate understanding of the presence of water is also emphasized during this scene. Herbert writes, "Presently Paul recalled the words of 467 Kalima in Yueh's O.C. Bible. He said: "From water does all life begin." Jessica stared at him. Where did he learn that quotation? she asked herself. He hasn't studied the mysteries. "Thus it is spoken," Chani said. "Giudichar mantene: It is written in the Shah-Nama that water was the first of all things created."⁶⁸ Paul's wisdom and awareness of water here is three-fold. Firstly, he is intimately familiar with the Occidental by exactly citing "the words of 467 Kalima in Yueh's O.C. Bible." Secondly, it shows his familiarity with "the mysteries" of the Bene Gesserit, even though he has not studied them. Finally, Chani mentioning "Thus it is spoken" and referencing a "Giudichar: a holy truth"⁶⁹ from the "Shah-Nama: the half-legendary First Book of the Zensunni Wanderers."⁷⁰ "Thus it is spoken" establishes Paul as a prophet. Similarly, exact references to the Fremen holy texts paints Paul as being intimately familiar with the spiritual knowledge of the Occidental Imperium and the Oriental Fremen. At the same time, the definitions of the Shah-Nama and the Giudichar are evidently highly Orientalist references. "Zensunni Wandereres" establishes that the faith of the Fremen is based on three elements: "Zen," an Eastern philosophy, "sunni," the predominant sect of Islam, and "Wanderers," referring to the nomadic nature of the Fremen. "Zen" and "Sunni" along with "Wanderers" combines complex religious and cultural traditions into a single, simplified, and exoticized religion. This is exactly what Said argues: that the West often puts together different Eastern cultures—like Buddhism, Islam, and various nomadic traditions into a

⁶⁸ Ibid, 504.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 656.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 667.

monolithic Orient. The Shah-Nama's similarity to the O.C. Bible reflects how the religion of the Fremen is not their own and rather instilled into Fremen mythology through some in universe version of Orientalism by the Bene Gesserit. Chani's snap reaction to Paul's speech "Thus it is spoken" also gives an insight into the importance of religion within Fremen society. Allusions to Islam, also evoke in Western audiences a level of religious fundamentalism that Herbert is trying to allude to. Herbert presents the faith-based philosophy of the Fremen as a strength and a weakness. From an environmental determinist perspective, religion is useful in a harsh environment like Arrakis. "God created Arrakis to train the faithful"⁷¹ exemplifies this idea. Herbert appreciates the strength the Fremen gain from their extreme environment, made possible through their faith.

After his fight with Jamis, Paul also gets his Fremen names of Usul and Muad'dib. Beyond the meaning of these names as prescribed in the book and the Arabic etymology, they represent Paul's ascent into manhood and his initiation into the Ichwan Bedwine (Fremen) and the Sietch Tabr (Stilgar's sietch). Ichwane Bedwine, literally translates in Arabic to the brotherhood of Bedouins—Bedouin literally meaning desert dwellers in Arabic.⁷² It gives an idea of how Herbert sees the Fremen and how they see themselves. Referring to them as Bedouin, is a departure from identifying them with the Amazigh/Berbers. It may suggest an unintentional conflation between them, which would certainly suggest a general exoticization of the Fremen as Middle Eastern desert dwellers. Importantly, the Bedouins largely identify as Arab, while the Berbers are distinctly non-Arab, but the Bedouins and Berbers both share a nomadic, tribalist, and Muslim societal structure. It calls into question whether Herbert intended for the Fremen to be Arab or not. If he had chosen to keep the Fremen as distinctly Berber, there would be an

⁷¹ Ibid, 501.

⁷² Kennedy, *Epic Worldbuilding*, 104.

interesting nuance, because of the historic oppression of the Berbers by the Arabs beginning after the initial Islamic conquest in the 7th and 8th centuries. The term Berber also comes from the word barbarian, reflecting this history and even suggests further essentialization. It seems that Herbert, instead, is essentializing the common element of being nomadic, tribalist, and Muslim desert dwellers. Kennedy has a similar and more pessimistic view: “The Fremen thus appear as a quasi-Arabic and Middle Eastern people bent on jihad to avenge their historical oppression, unable or unwilling to think rationally and modernize their way of living. To be fair, Herbert’s depiction of the Fremen is a far cry from popular mid-twentieth-century views of Arabs as “terroristic, hook-nosed, [and] venal.”⁷³ The view that the Fremen are “bent on jihad” and “unable or unwilling to think rationally” is overly critical of Herbert. It is clear that he identifies with the Fremen and their ideals. Further, it is actually Paul who initiates the Galactic Jihad, despite his earnest attempts to prevent it.

Herbert’s projection of these Orientalist tropes onto the Fremen also furthers the Saidian binary into an allusion of Cain and Abel. Through the Fremen, Herbert proposes a structure of society that is radically different from the Occidental Imperium being nomadic and in harmony with nature. Thus, the Fremen adopt a pastoralist identity of asceticism with the Imperium naturally falling in the role of Cain. It fits with Herbert’s many other Biblical references. Like the Bible, Herbert favors the pastoralist Fremen. Most indicative of this is the Fremen saying that Herbert often uses: “Polish comes from the cities; wisdom from the desert.”⁷⁴ Emphasizing that “wisdom” comes “from the desert,” shows that in the cities there is only survival and only those who live and coexist with the desert know its wisdom. It is the wisdom that Herbert believes makes the Fremen superior.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Herbert, *Dune*, 61.

The technology that the Fremen do use reflects their wisdom and religious dedication upon which their society functions. When delivering Jamis' water to the reserve underground, Stilgar tells Jessica that "We have more than thirty-eight million decaliters here ... [and] there were those among us in need of water," he said, "yet they would come here and not touch this water. Do you know that?" Jessica also notes that in filling the pool the Fremen exhibit "Superb accuracy in water measurement ... she noted that the walls of the meter trough held no trace of moisture after the water's passage. The water flowed off those walls without binding tension. She saw a profound clue to Fremen technology in the simple fact: they were perfectionists."⁷⁵ And finally, "[the Fremen are] in league with the future, she thought. They have their mountain to climb. This is the scientist's dream...and these simple people, these peasants, are filled with it."⁷⁶ Stilgar and Jessica's conversation prove a couple of points: firstly, the Fremen are capable of advanced technology even to the extent that "they were perfectionists," but choose to focus their resources and abilities on the religious nature of their society. Similarly, the dedication of the Fremen to their own religion that even "those among us in need of water" "would not touch this water," reflects that adherence to their faith surpasses their survival needs. It is this last point that Jessica admires and why she believes that they are "in league with the future." It is clear that this is a far more sustainable philosophy for human survival as a species. In the same breath, however, Jessica immediately understands how this idea can be exploited. Referring to the Fremen as a "scientist's dream" and "peasants," further dehumanizes them in this respect. Herbert actively counters the dehumanization of the Fremen by showing their reverence and understanding of the environment around them. Besides their asceticism reflected in their consumption of water and reverence of nature, Herbert further proves their integration and

⁷⁵ Ibid, 515-516.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 517.

understanding through the sandworms. The sandworms provide Herbert with a tangible object to reflect the power and value of Arrakis. The sandworms represent the primary obstacle to expansion on Arrakis, but they also are understood to be the ‘makers’ of spice and hence also reflect Arrakis’ inherent value. The Fremen venerate the sandworm, worshipping it religiously; however, they also use them for transportation and even combat. It proves Herbert’s philosophy that understanding nature can lead to great benefits.

The Sandworm

The Sandworm represents an important tool for Herbert in building the Saidian binary between the Fremen and the Imperium. The introduction of a sublime being or even place is common throughout science fiction and postcolonial literature. It provides the author with an object on which to project the hostility of the native environment. Said explains: “In the depths of this Oriental stage stands a prodigious cultural repertoire ... in some cases names only, half imagined, half-known; monsters, devils, heroes; terrors, pleasures, desires.”⁷⁷ The monsters and specifically Herbert’s worm serve to present an impossible and sublime aesthetic of the East; a land of mystery and threat protected by an impossible monster. The worm is exotic and mythical in its existence and function on Arrakis. The worm travels in the desert making it impossible for human settlement on most of Arrakis. It provides an idea that Arrakis is where the monsters roam and where the planet physically fights back against human expansionism. Sheryl Vint reflects this sentiment in her “The Animals in That Country: Science Fiction and Animal Studies” where she claims that Alien characters may be represented in terms that we typically associate with animals, raising questions about how we interact with living animals, as well as about

⁷⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 63.

environmentalism, human/animal symbiosis, and animals as companions or fellow sentient beings.⁷⁸ Herbert himself calls the worm “the black beast” --from the French “bête noire” --in an interview with McNelly, however, at the same time he humanizes the sandworm as providing wisdom.⁷⁹ The sandworm adopts several identities for the different people and groups of people that observe it. The sandworm rules Arrakis and is in constant opposition to colonizing forces trying to extract the spice. The Imperium, in turn, attempts to either mitigate the damage or eliminate the sandworms all together. The Fremen, however, view the sandworms entirely differently as they adopt the worms as a religious figure.

The semantics of the worm itself immediately evoke these ideas. The Great Houses simply refer to them as ‘sandworms,’ which makes it clear that they do not understand the nuances of the worm. By calling them ‘sandworms,’ it evokes ideas of vermin and pests. It furthers the ideas of Western greed and misunderstanding of nature. The Fremen in turn name them either Shai-hulud, makers, “Old Father Eternity,” or “Grandfather of the Desert.”⁸⁰ Shai-hulud holds a religious connotation and is even referred to as a monotheistic God. In multiple instances, Stilgar uses the name Shai-hulud in the following context: “If the Shai-hulud grant, then you may yet pass within to become a Reverend Mother.”⁸¹ In this context, Shai-hulud is referred to as a god if not even *the* God. Practically, this idea is confusing considering that there are many sandworms on the planet, but Shai-hulud could be the name of the spirit that embodies all of them. In this same idea, the Fremen referring to the worms as “Father” and “Old Grandfather Eternity,” further humanize the sandworm, as they see the sandworms as old wise

⁷⁸ Sherryl Vint, “The Animals in That Country: Science Fiction and Animal Studies,” *Science Fiction Studies* 35, no. 2 (July 2008): 178, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25475137>

⁷⁹ Herbert, Frank and Beverly. Interview by Willis E. McNelly, 3 Feb. 1969. https://archive.org/details/cfls_000091

⁸⁰ Herbert, *Dune*, 856.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 476.

men. The worship of an animal/monster could also be another reference to an element of Native-American culture, reopening the ideas of primitive essentialization.

The name “makers” comes from the understanding that the sandworms create the coveted spice of Arrakis. This provides an interesting dichotomy for the colonizing Great Houses: the sandworms make spice harvesting dangerous, yet without them, the spice would not exist at all. Herbert uses this tension to critique the exploitative nature of the colonizer and the Occident. The Fremen understand this connection and worship the sandworms, but the colonizers remain willfully ignorant, driven solely by profit. This parallels Dr. Kynes and the Fremen’s desire to work with nature and make Arrakis a paradise for its inhabitants; however, importantly the existence of the sandworms is predicated on Arrakis being a sand planet as “ water ...is poisonous to them.”⁸² Important to the plot is the Fremen ‘water of the maker,’ which is obtained by drowning a young sandworm. The drug (or poison) is consumed both by Paul and Jessica as they attempt to attain their respective authoritative positions within Fremen society. This aligns well with Native American vision quests, which are also often guided by psychedelic substances. Similarly, “Most of the sand on Arrakis is credited to sandworm action.”⁸³ Hence, the sand and the spice are credited to the sandworms. Hence, Arrakis and the sandworms cannot exist without each other. The Fremen goal to make Arrakis a paradise would mean the death of their God and their way of life. This, then, also further connect the ideas of life, death, and water. It reflects the importance Herbert places on environmentalism and how Orientalist tropes like the worms are essential in portraying his ideas.

Herbert connects the ideas of the sandworm and the associated philosophies with Fremen strength. Their weapon of choice, the Crysknife, is shrouded in mystery and exoticism. It is

⁸² Ibid, 857.

⁸³ Ibid.

primitive “a blade ground from a sandworm’s tooth,”⁸⁴ making it reminiscent of tribalist communities like the Native American, who used every part of the animal. Despite it being primitive in nature, the crysknife’s mysterious abilities—associated with sandworms—reflects Fremen strength and martial abilities.

The first introduction to the crysknife is when Lady Jessica’s Arrakkeen, Fremen servant Shadout Mapes grants her a crysknife. Jessica immediately recognizes the mysticism, “It could only be one thing, Jessica knew, the fabled crysknife of Arrakis, the blade that had never been taken off the planet and was known only by rumor and wild gossip.”⁸⁵ Mapes explains to her that “This is an unfixed blade, my Lady. Keep it near you. More than a week away from flesh and it begins to disintegrate. It’s yours, a tooth of shai-hulud, for as long as you live.”⁸⁶ Duncan Idaho⁸⁷ later adds that “The Harkonnen reward of a million solaris for anyone who’ll bring in a single crysknife.”⁸⁸ The mysticism and rarity of the knives go beyond just their ability. The detail that if the knife is “More than a week away from flesh and it begins to disintegrate” shows that the knife must be constantly on the warrior’s person. This reemphasizes the environmental determinism of Arrakis: all able Fremen must be warriors, and they must always be ready to fight and endure their enemies like the environment itself. It is also explained that when a crysknife is given to an outsider, “They are ours. They may never leave Arrakis without our consent.”⁸⁹ The crysknife, then, represents integration within the Fremen brotherhood and even an interesting reversion of the Saidian binary. It indicates an idea that the Fremen gain an ownership over those

⁸⁴ Ibid, 95.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 87.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 88.

⁸⁷ Donald E. Palumbo defines “Duncan Idaho” as “Born and raised on Giede Prime and tortured by the Harkonnens in its capital city, Barony, Duncan Idaho was rescued from Harkonnen bondage by the Atrides. Loyal, proud, truthful, ruthless, and moral, was a Swordmaster of Ginaz, and Atrides retainer, and Paul Atrides instructor in weaponry on Caladan. See Palumbo, *A Dune Companion*, 107.

⁸⁸ Herbert, *Dune*, 152.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 149.

who become part of their brotherhood. Herbert's use of possession by the Fremen reflects his belief that their philosophy is superior. The idea that once exposed to the Fremen philosophy there is no return to their own way.

The crysknife is so important because Herbert envisions, in yet another reversion from technology, a world in which hand-to-hand combat makes a resurgence. This element is also indicative of *Dune*'s status as part of the Neo-Chivalric Romance genre. He illustrates this through the introduction of Holtzman shields, which make projectile weapons ineffective. Yet again a reversion against what the reader would consider futuristic combat. More conventional modern weapon equivalents, lasguns, are proven ineffective because "A lasgun-shield explosion was a dangerous variable, could be more powerful than atomics, could kill only the gunner and his shielded target."⁹⁰ The only other highly effective weapons used are the "atomics," which are also largely unused due to a political ban on all-out warfare.

Regardless, Herbert goes to great lengths to emphasize the superiority of Fremen in combat. In their assault on Arrakis, the Harkonnens and the Emperor employ the most formidable force in the imperium, the Sardaukar.⁹¹ Like the Fremen, Herbert details that environmental determinism is what leads to their elite abilities on the battlefield. In a conversation between Duke Leto⁹² and Paul, Paul exclaims: "But every report on Salusa

⁹⁰ Ibid, 236.

⁹¹ Frank Herbert defines "Sardaukar" as "the soldier-fanatics of the Padishah Emperor. They were men from an environmental background of such ferocity that it killed six out of thirteen persons before the age of eleven. Their military training emphasized ruthlessness and near-suicidal disregard for personal safety. They were taught from infancy to use cruelty as a standard weapon weakening opponents with terror. See Herbert, *Dune*, 854.

⁹² Donald E. Palumbo defines "Duke Leto" as "Atreides, Duke Leto (10,140 – 10,191) – The son of Duke Paulus Atreides and the father of Paul Atreides and Lady Alia Atreides, Duke Leto Atreides relocated the Atreides from Caladan to Arrakis in 10,191 on orders from Emperor Shaddam IV. During the Harkonnen's successful 10,191 assault on Arrakeen, Leto was drugged by Dr. Wellington Yueh, a traitor who placed a poisoned false tooth in Leto's mouth in the hope that Leto could use it to kill Vladimir Harkonnen. Leto died trying to kill the Baron with the poison in the false tooth, committing suicide in the process, but the Baron narrowly survived this assassination attempt. See, Palumbo, *A Dune Companion*, 63.

Secundus⁹³ says S.S. is a hell world!” and Leto responds, “Undoubtedly. But if you were going to raise tough, strong, ferocious men, what environmental conditions would you impose on them?”⁹⁴ The Duke goes on to explain that Arrakis is similar: “When you get outside the towns and garrison villages, it’s every bit as terrible a place as Salusa Secundus.”⁹⁵ Here it is clear that Herbert places an immense importance on the environmental factors when establishing which people will produce the mightiest warriors. Likewise, the significance of calling Salusa Secundus “S.S.” and a “hell world” goes a long way in establishing the evil of the Sardaukar and the situations they are put through. Similarly, likening the rest of Arrakis outside of the “towns and Garrison villages” shows the Imperium’s aversion to Arrakis, which Herbert goes on to subvert in detail through the beauties of Arrakis’ deserts. Herbert repeatedly leans into the sublime image of the vast desert and the sandworms directly contradicting the idea of Arrakis being a hell world similar to Salusa Secundus.

The abilities of the Fremen are made all the more impressive when Thufir Hawat⁹⁶ explains to Baron Harkonnen the data he is receiving from the occupation of Arrakis after reconquering it from the Atrides. “If [the Fremen] killed twenty thousand [Sardaukar], [the Sardaukar] lost almost five for one.”⁹⁷ Herbert believes that Arrakis is a more unforgiving planet that produces even more able warriors than Salusa Secundus. What is also significant in these two parallel conversations between Paul and Leto and between Thufir Hawat and the Baron is

⁹³ Frank Herbert defines “Salusa Secundus” as “Third planet of Gamma Waiping; designated Imperial Prison Planet after removal of the Royal Court to Kaitan. Salusa Secundus is homeworld of House Corrino, and the second stopping point in migrations of the Wandering Zensunni. Fremen tradition says they were slaves on S.S. for nine generations. See Herbert, *Dune*, 854.

⁹⁴ Herbert, *Dune*, 71.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Donald E. Palumbo defines “Thufir Hawat” as “Was Duke Leto Atrides’ Mentat Master of Assassins. After the fall of Arrakeen Hawat joined forces with the Fremen but was captured by Sardaukar troops and was delivered to Baron Vladimir Harkonnen. He became his Mentat (class of Imperial citizen trained for supreme accomplishments of logic, ‘human computers’), replacing the deceased Piter de Vries. See Palumbo, *A Dune Companion*, 103.

⁹⁷ Herbert, *Dune*, 608.

the similarity in which they reference possible exploitation of the Fremen. Leto explains in the same conversation that “It’ll require patience to exploit them secretly and wealth to equip them properly”⁹⁸ and the Baron similarly said, “You must admit it’d be a way to develop a substantial work force [of Fremen] on Arrakis—use the place as a prison planet.”⁹⁹ Here it is clear that Herbert gives no moral superiority to the Atrides in relation to the obviously evil Harkonnens. Still being a part of the Occidental Imperium, they hold these same beliefs that Herbert critiques in Western society. They still see the Fremen as a resource to “exploit” “secretly.” Thereby, Herbert encourages us to empathize with the ideas of the pastoral/nomadic Fremen.

Herbert also describes several physical adaptations the Fremen have undergone in their response to the harsh environment of Arrakis. Lady Jessica notes when making a small incision on a Fremen with a knife: “There was a thick welling of blood that stopped almost immediately. Ultrafast coagulation, Jessica thought. A moisture-conserving mutation?”¹⁰⁰ The idea of a “mutation” alludes directly to Darwinist ideas of evolution. It further supports the idea that environmental determinism has allowed the Fremen to not only become better adapted to their environment (conserving water), but also to combat (losing less blood). There are also various references to their heightened awareness. When Paul and Jessica first encounter the Fremen, they had already been watching them for a length of time.

Their adaptation to the desert gives them a physical and even psychic advantage over the Great Houses. Paul contemplates in his internal dialogue that “People need hard times and oppression to develop psychic muscles.”¹⁰¹ These “hard times” refer specifically to those that Arrakis imposes on the Fremen. Herbert explicitly states that these hard times “develop psychic

⁹⁸ Ibid, 71.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 529.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 89.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 263.

muscles.” It indicates that Fremen superiority goes beyond their physical prowess but also extends to their mental abilities. Similarly, Herbert states that “the Fremen were a desert people whose entire ancestry was accustomed to hostile landscapes.”¹⁰² The idea of Oriental martial skill is not unique among the indigenous populations of Oriental texts; however, Herbert also subverts these traditional Orientalist themes by claiming their mental superiority.

Similarly, in one of the wisdoms recorded by the Princess Irulan,¹⁰³ coming from Paul as a Messianic figure states that “We came from Caladan—a paradise world for our form of life. There existed no need on Caladan to build a physical paradise or a paradise of the mind—we could see the actuality all around us. And the price we paid was the price men have always paid for achieving a paradise in this life—we went soft, we lost our edge.”¹⁰⁴ Herbert makes it clear that Caladan being “a paradise world” caused the Atreides to lose “our edge” both physically and mentally.

The culmination of Fremen martial power is embodied in Paul’s Fedaykin units. The Fedaykin are “the death commandos who guarded Muad’Dib.”¹⁰⁵ Herbert later clarifies that Fedaykin literally translates to “death commandos” in the Fremen Chakobsa language. The Fedaykin enabled Herbert to emphasize the Fremen’s superiority as fighters, and that they are primarily moved by faith. They are clearly derived from the Fedayeen, an Arabic term that generally translates to “Those who sacrifice themselves.” Additionally, the Fedaykin, as military units, are likely inspired by the Palestinian Fedayeen, which is likely what Herbert is referring to. This is significant, considering Herbert wrote at a time of intense conflict between Arab nations

¹⁰² Ibid, 822.

¹⁰³ Donald E. Palumbo defines “Princess Irulan (10,176 - 10,268)” as “Eldest daughter of Emperor Shadram IV and Anirah, accompanied Shadram to Arrakis, where she was betrothed to Paul Atreides as a condition of Shadram’s surrender.” Palumbo, *A Dune Companion*, 111.

¹⁰⁴ Herbert, *Dune*, 411.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 623.

and Israel. The most significant element of the Fedaykin's real world counterpart is the idea of "sacrifice." Paul states that the Fedaykin will "raid with me again until no Harkonnen breathes Arrakeen air."¹⁰⁶ It is clear that the Fedaykin are also the members of the Fremen that most bought into the idea of Paul being the Messiah. They are "pledged to prevent [Paul's death] because the Fremen wished to preserve the wisdom of Muad'Dib."¹⁰⁷ Herbert's characterization of the Fremen, and specifically the Fedaykin, as the strongest among them, suggests that environmental determinism, followed by zealotry, creates the strongest warriors. It also essentializes the Fremen into a monolith that blindly follow Paul. There is no actual opposition against Paul, despite many of his actions being distinctly against Fremen philosophy. It is the Fedaykin warriors, who are also responsible for the widespread destruction during the later Galactic Jihad; a fate Herbert alludes to through their various war chants. The most gruesome: "The world is a carcass, the man chanted, his voice wailing across the dunes. Who can turn away the Angel of Death? What Shai-hulud has decreed must be."¹⁰⁸ Filled with dramatic literary elements like "The world is a carcass" and "the Angel of Death," Herbert portrays the Fedaykin as gruesome killers justified by their unwavering loyalty to the Messiah. They even build their fanaticism with religious reference to "Shai-hulud" and his "decree." Herbert admires the Fremen and their natural abilities, but he clearly believes that they can be corrupted. Despite their strength and discipline in rejecting technology, they become gruesome and destructive when pushed to their full potential.

Preempting the description of the Fedaykin, Paul and Jessica discuss Paul's ascent to his Messianic role within Fremen society. Jessica quotes "a Bene Gesserit proverb to him: When

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 656.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 681.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 628.

religion and politics travel in the same cart, the riders believe nothing can stand in their way. Their movement becomes headlong—faster and faster and faster. They put aside all thought of obstacles and forget that a precipice does not show itself to the man in a blind rush until it's too late.”¹⁰⁹ This is a clear indication by Herbert that Paul and Jessica are fully aware that they are able to use their religious authority to bend the Fremen to their own will and the dangers that will ensue. Despite validating Fremen society as a more sustainable future for humanity, Herbert uses the corruption of the Fremen to show how such a society can easily be corrupted and led to commit mass atrocities.

IV. Corruption of the Fremen

Herbert offers an in-depth exploration of Fremen culture, religion, and political structures, presenting them in deliberate contrast to the Imperium he seeks to critique. He portrays the Fremen as a people shaped by environmental determinism. Their religion, culture, and institutions are governed by the technology, ecology, and resources around them. He believes that these conditions make them a more sustainable model for humanity. At the same time, however, he highlights aspects of Fremen culture that make them vulnerable to exploitation. Dr. Liet Kynes and Paul Atreides (along with the Bene Gesserit) are the two main figures representing corruption. They both function in between the Saidian binary. Dr. Kynes is born on Arrakis and considers himself a Fremen yet he has a loyalty beyond them to his father and his ideas of utopia. The Bene Gesserit, as an institution, subvert the ideas of the Imperium and the Fremen systematically and actively try to manipulate both for their own gain. They create tension in the binary by challenging its foundational ideals and practices. Paul, similarly, holds loyalty to

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 620.

the Imperium, the Bene Gesserit, and the Fremen, which ultimately creates a tension that leads to the unraveling of the entire system. Herbert portrays both of these characters as intrinsically good, with each sincerely attempting to act in the best interest of Arrakis and the Fremen. However, they ultimately use the religious structure of Fremen society to manipulate it into serving their own ends. For Paul, this manipulation leads to catastrophe. It subverts the entire basis of the Saidian binary of *Dune*. It proves that the Fremen are fallible and suggests that they may not be the best view for humanity.

Corruption by Liet

Dr. Liet Kynes is the Imperial Planetologist (ecologist) on Arrakis, who is supposed to serve no political end. He is there to assist in the spice collection and the endurance of life on the inhospitable planet of *Dune*. However, Herbert makes it clear that his true intentions are those instilled by the Imperial Planetologist before him, his father Pardot Kynes. Like the Atreides and the Harkonnens, he states “What a tool they could be! Fremen: an ecological and geological force of almost unlimited potential.”¹¹⁰ Even when he sees Harkonnens kill Fremen youths he merely thinks “They were destroying the tools with which he intended to remake a planet!”¹¹¹ It echoes exactly what the Great Houses intend with the Fremen, but with slightly less mal intent. However, it is reductive of their agency and freedom, something Herbert heavily emphasizes as part of being human. Pardot and Liet Kynes’ objective is to turn Arrakis into a green planet with abundant water, fauna, and flora. They approach this goal as an almost entirely rational pursuit as Herbert claims that “To Pardot Kynes, the planet was merely an expression of energy, a machine

¹¹⁰ Herbert, *Dune*, 797.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 799.

being driven by its sun. What it needed was reshaping to fit it to man's needs."¹¹² This idea echoes almost exactly the aforementioned interpretation of Genesis: "expand, multiply, and subjugate." Nonetheless, the Fremen do not operate by these ideas. In their Orientalized primitivist characterization, they have no mind to subjugate and conquer like the Imperium. The Fremen operate on prophecy and Herbert makes it clear that they did wish to see Arrakis be turned into a lush paradise; perhaps only to bring an abundance of water. However, Herbert likely dooms Paul, Dr. Kynes, and the Fremen, because he sees this effort as trying to conquer and subdue Arrakis. The introduction of surface water means the extinction of the sandworms and without the sandworms there is no Arrakis and even no Fremen, if Herbert's environmental determinism is correct.

Herbert explains, then, how Pardot was able to tap into the Fremen mythology. He explains that the sietch had ordered him to be executed, but Kynes said, "Remove yourself" and "[the executioner] walked three paces and deliberately fell on his own knife ... Suicide? Some say Shai-hulud moved him ... From that instant, Kynes had but to point ... Entire Fremen tribes went. Men died, women died, children died."¹¹³ From this small "omen," Kynes was able to claim a divine authority to his message, which gave him access to his "tools" to reform Arrakis.

Dr. Liet Kynes in turn also adopts this deification and the Imperial title of Planetary ecologist in the name of faufreluches. Liet was born to a Fremen mother and "a full Fremen and sandrider who had killed more than a hundred Harkonnens,"¹¹⁴ yet he still adopts the image of a God. This idea confuses the Atrides when they first arrive on Arrakis and attempt to survey the Fremen population; all they know is that "All seem to give their allegiance to someone called

¹¹² Ibid, 797.

¹¹³ Ibid, 800- 801.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 808.

Liet ... suggest[ing] this Liet may be a local deity.”¹¹⁵ The Fremen also refer to Liet as a God in this sense much like how they refer to Shai-hulud: “Liet wishes it.”¹¹⁶ Similarly, it is clear that Liet does not want the Imperium to know that he is the one referred to by the Fremen as exemplified when visiting Arrakeen early on, “One of [the Fremen servants] whispered: “Liet.” Kynes turned, scowling.”¹¹⁷ The nature of Kynes’s deification among the Fremen is significant for several reasons. Herbert uses it to illustrate how easily the Fremen can be corrupted--even to a noble cause--once the agent of corruption assumes religious authority. This religious authority is introduced to the Fremen first through Liet Kynes, as strategized by his father, and later also with the Missionaria Protectiva by the Bene Gesserit, setting the stage for Jessica and Paul. Herbert uses this as a cautionary tale against outside figures claiming religious authority. He shows the Fremen susceptibility to this idea by Orientalizing and primitivizing them, but ultimately, it serves to warn all of us.

Liet Kynes also serves as a steppingstone for further, more destructive corruption through Paul. The Fremen seem more accepting of outside strangers, despite the water burden that they concern themselves with heavily. In accepting Duncan Idaho to live among the Fremen, Stilgar states “There is precedent for this: Liet serves two masters.”¹¹⁸ Paul in this sense is a very Messianic character and exemplifies elements from both Jesus Christ and the Prophet Muhammed. In keeping with this idea, Liet functions in the allusion to Christ as a John the Baptist character. He enables Paul to be accepted into the Fremen sietch and lays the foundation

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 137.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 342.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 201.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 151.

for his religious authority. Similarly, he helps Paul and Jessica (the holy mother) escape, believing that Paul will help fulfill his cause to turn Arrakis into a paradise.¹¹⁹

The Corruption by the Bene Gesserit and Paul the Messiah

“A profound clarity filled Kynes’ mind ... No more terrible disaster could befall your people than for them to fall into the hands of a Hero.”¹²⁰—the final words of Liet Kynes.

The Bene Gesserit as an organization provides conflict to the Saidian binary by regularly undermining the concepts upon which they are built. The Bene Gesserit hope not only to influence the Fremen, but the Imperium as a whole. At the time of the events of *Dune*, the Bene Gesserit already hold immense influence over the Imperium through genetic engineering and manipulation. Despite operating in a rigid patriarchal society, the sisterhood holds immense agency and influence. Through their Missionaria Protectiva they also influence and manipulate the Fremen to their will by implementing their own mythology into the Fremen religion. Although this allows Paul to mobilize the Fremen for the Galactic Jihad, Herbert uses them as a cautionary tale that even the Fremen, who he categorizes as a more sustainable model of humanity, can easily be manipulated. Herbert admits in interviews that Paul was not meant to be a hero. Despite this, both the novel’s initial reception in 1965 as well as Villeneuve’s “Dune: Part Two” reveal that many readers and viewers continue to glorify Paul as a traditional hero. It is this idea that Herbert purposely tries to undermine in *Dune*. He uses Paul to show the dangers of a charismatic Messianic figure and how he/she can lead the masses to commit horrible atrocities through blind devotion. Herbert warns that a well-intentioned leader can become a tyrant. In many interviews, Herbert likens Paul to figures like George Patton and even John F. Kennedy to

¹¹⁹ Kennedy, *Frank Herbert’s Dune: A Critical Companion*, 40.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 445.

warn humanity from these leaders.¹²¹ He demonstrates how Paul is able to corrupt the once-pure Fremen with relative ease. Even though the Fremen reject technological progress and have an philosophy of simplicity, asceticism, and resilience embodying Abel, they are still foiled and corrupted by a Messianic figure like Paul. Herbert intentionally draws from religious Messiahs and traditional hero archetypes to construct this idea of Paul. They include Jesus Christ, the Prophet Mohammed.

Herbert introduces the idea of Paul as the false Messiah by establishing him as a manufactured one. The genetic engineering of Paul is extremely important in providing a rational explanation for his superior abilities. Similarly, the myths that Paul and Jessica use to take religious authority among the Fremen are fabricated by the Bene Gesserit: “The Missionaria Protectiva.” Jessica thinks to herself “*Kwisatz Haderach, ... Did our Missionaria Protectiva plant that legend here, too?*” The thought fanned her secret hope for Paul. “*He could be the Kwisatz Haderach. He could be.*”¹²² The Missionaria Protectiva implicates both Paul and the Bene Gesserit equally in their exploitation of the religious zealotry of the Fremen. Herbert proves the effectivity of the Bene Gesserit’s tactics with the Fremen at several moments throughout the book, most notably during Paul and Jessica’s introduction to Stilgar’s sietch. There, Jessica is challenged to combat by the Fremen skeptical of her religious authority, Jamis. Although initially challenging Jessica, Paul volunteers as her champion. In setting up a fight between Jamis and Paul, Herbert demonstrates Paul’s abilities in comparison to Jamis. Stilgar explains that Jamis “seeks by this tahaddi challenge to get back at me as well. There’s too much of violence in Jamis for him ever to make a good leader—too much ghafla, the distraction. He gives his mouth to the rules and his heart to the sarfa, the turning away. No, he could never make

¹²¹ Herbert, *The Maker of Dune: Insights of a Master of Science Fiction*, 98.

¹²² Herbert, *Dune*, 212.

a good leader.”¹²³ Stilgar shows that Paul is the strongest and most able instead of the “violent” and emotional Jamis. Herbert emphasizes this through Arabic terminology like “tahaddi,” “ghafla,” and “sarfa”¹²⁴ to further exoticize the Fremen and attribute these errors as Oriental. Similarly, the brutality of the tahaddi challenge also serves to illustrate a primitive picture of the Fremen. However, what is most important is that Paul at 15, previously described as frail, is easily able to handle the grown adult Jamis. The other Fremen comment on this: “Him against Jamis and not a mark on him,”¹²⁵ with Stilgar even berating Paul earlier for toying with Jamis. The only thing that prevents Paul’s swift victory is his reliance on technology. Jessica comments during the fight: “The boy’s reactions were those of youth and trained to a peak these people had never seen. But the attack was trained, too, and conditioned by the necessities of penetrating a shield barrier. A shield would repel too fast a blow, admit only the slowly deceptive counter.”¹²⁶ Through this scene, Herbert establishes the genetic superiority of Paul, while simultaneously furthering his criticism of the Occidental reliance on technology. Finally, it also allows him to further illustrate the Fremen as a primitive and Orientalized society that promotes and honors violence. This is complemented at the end of the novel as Paul’s only worthy adversary is the Na-Baron Feyd Rautha Harkonnen. Feyd Rautha is also a product of extensive genetic manipulation as the Baron narrates, “One day, a Harkonnen would be Emperor. Not himself, and no spawn of his loins ... Not this Rabban he’d summoned, of course. But Rabban’s younger brother, young Feyd Rautha. There was a sharpness to the boy that the Baron enjoyed...a

¹²³ Herbert, *Dune*, 483.

¹²⁴ Frank Herbert defines “ghafla” as “giving oneself up to gadfly distractions. Thus: a changeable person, one not to be trusted.” See Frank Herbert, *Dune*, 841. “Ghafla” is Arabic for oblivious. Frank Herbert defines “Sarfa” as “the act of turning away from God.” See Frank Herbert, *Dune*, 856. In Arabic, sarfa means pure. Herbert defines “Tahaddi challenge” as Fremen challenge to mortal combat, usually to test some primal issue. See Frank Herbert, *Dune*, 859. Tahaddi is Arabic for determine. Translation from Cambridge online dictionary <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/translate>.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 494.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 490.

ferocity.”¹²⁷ Later he describes him as “A Muscle-minded tank-brain.”¹²⁸ This is then reflected in his fight with Paul where he is briefly able to hold his own as he “threw Paul off just enough that he missed his footing and found himself thrown hard to the floor, Feyd-Rautha on top.”¹²⁹ The performance of these two fighters is in the context that the Fremens are far superior to the Harkonnen and Atreides soldiers. Through these scenes Herbert dehumanizes Paul into a monstrous technology and weapon aimed at the Imperium.

It is not only the establishment of myths or genetic engineering, but also the Bene Gesserit training that allows Paul to take religious authority. In a near direct allusion to the rebirth of Christ, Paul undergoes the ordeal of consuming the water of the maker. Already holding immense religious significance to the Fremens, Paul ingests the water of the maker and enters a three weeklong coma. Initially believing he is poisoned, Jessica “Through it all threaded the realization that her son was the Kwisatz Haderach, the one who could be many places at once.”¹³⁰ Meanwhile Paul, Jessica, and Chani are surrounded by makers: “We are never without them these days.” Herbert meticulously incorporates the religious aspects that are significant to the Fremens belief system and to the Christ allusion, including symbolic references to the sandworms as makers, the water of life, and Paul’s resurrection-like awakening in the cave. Once he awakens, Paul explains, “There is in each of us an ancient force that takes and an ancient force that gives. A man finds little difficulty facing that place within himself where the taking force dwells, but it’s almost impossible for him to see into the giving force without changing into something other than man.”¹³¹ Although clearly announcing his status as the Kwisatz Haderach,

¹²⁷ Ibid, 378.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 379.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 789.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 722.

¹³¹ Ibid, 722.

Herbert also emphasizes it is impossible to “facing that place within himself,” “without changing into something other than man.” Despite better judgement, Paul sets the Jihad in motion, embracing his new identity. It is a sharp departure from his earlier claims, which were more in line with the Fremmen: “I will ease the harshness of the place with all the powers at my disposal. It shall become a garden world, full of gentle things.”¹³² His beliefs and actions were once more integrated with the authentic Fremmen spirit. Paul, becoming the Lisan Al’Gaib, illustrates his transition into a more destructive force.

Paul’s deification also matches his transition into a role similar to the Prophet Muhammed during his time as a warlord. The absolute loyalty, although expressed more Christ-like, is evident among his soldiers like the elite Fedaykin who refer to Paul as “Him.”¹³³ The tone indicates that Paul has become a God. Even more significantly, Paul comes to the realization in the assault on Arrakeen that “In that instant, Paul saw how Stilgar had been transformed from the Fremmen naib to a creature of the Lisan al-Gaib, a receptacle for awe and obedience. It was a lessening of the man, and Paul felt the ghost-wind of the jihad in it. I have seen a friend become a worshiper, he thought”¹³⁴ Stilgar’s transformation from “Fremmen naib,” who Herbert considers the most noble character, to a “creature,” clearly reflects Herbert’s opinion on the corruption by Paul. Further “the ghost-wind of the jihad” accompanying Paul’s realization shows that Herbert believes this transformation to mark the beginning of the Galactic Jihad. Stilgar, the most noble of the noble Fremmen, being fully corrupted by Paul marks the beginning of the large-scale destruction of the galaxy and the fall of the Fremmen. Paul’s unleashing of destruction is affirmed in his trance like state after awakening he ominously states that “I’m at the fulcrum,” he said. “I

¹³² Ibid, 791.

¹³³ Ibid, 677.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 762.

cannot give without taking and I cannot take without....”¹³⁵ Although it seems that Paul has reached some state of enlightenment, finding himself “at the fulcrum” of giving and taking, he goes on to immediately order Jessica and Chani to organize “The Water of Death,” he said. “It’d be a chain reaction.” ... “Spreading death among the little makers, killing a vector of the life cycle that includes the spice and the makers. Arrakis will become a true desolation—without spice or maker.”¹³⁶ “He who can destroy a thing has the real control of it,” Paul said. “We can destroy the spice.”¹³⁷ These orders show a total perversion of the Fremen beliefs and religion. He threatens to turn the Water of Life to “The Water of Death,” “Spreading death among the little makers,” killing the “life cycle” of Arrakis, and making it “a true desolation.” He endangers the very foundations of Fremen society who hold the makers and Arrakis in the highest esteem. In doing so, Paul threatens to destroy all elements that are fundamental to their religious and cultural identity, even as he continues to receive their fanatical support.

Before fully initiating the Galactic Jihad, Paul states “All paths lead into darkness,”¹³⁸ making it clear that his prescience spells doom but he chooses to go ahead with the Jihad anyways. Herbert uses his allusions to portray Paul as a tragic hero whose actions lead to the downfall of himself, his family, the Fremen, and ultimately the universe as a whole. Although he attempts to avoid this, he recognizes that “All paths lead to darkness.”

IV. Conclusion

“Increase and multiply, and fill the *universe*, and subdue it, and rule over all manner of strange beasts and living creatures in the infinite airs, on the infinite earths and beneath them.”¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Ibid, 723.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 724.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 725.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 725.

¹³⁹ Herbert, *Dune*, 813.

Herbert's proclaimed bastardization of Genesis is ultimately the center of his political commentary. Envisioning a vast intergalactic empire, who rejects technological advancement in the pursuit of the development of the human mind still holds these values to be true. Herbert primarily uses Orientalism as a lens through which to critique human nature, particularly Western expansionism. He associates Orientalism with the reversion from technology and Western ideology with manifest destiny and the pursuit of domination over everything: people, resources, planets, and even the entire "*universe*." The "assumption is that the only thing wrong with our universe is that humans have not yet invented the right machine."¹⁴⁰ These philosophies are at the center of Herbert's critique, which resonate even more powerfully with today's society. He warns against greed, imperialism/colonialism, Messiah figures, religious fundamentalism, blind faith in technological advancement and promotes human adaptation, spirituality, environmentalism, and multiculturalism. In a society tending towards populism, climate change skepticism, revolutionary technologies like AI, and continuing issues like imperialism and colonialism, Herbert's warnings are of even greater importance. William A. Senior categorizes this perfectly: "the Dune series: these books are not simply metaphoric but highly predictive."¹⁴¹

Herbert's worldbuilding is undeniably Oriental even for those who are not intimately familiar with the text or Orientalism as a concept. Although Said's *Orientalism* gives an appropriate framework of ideas and terminology to discuss Near-Eastern influences on Herbert's text, Herbert is largely exempt from the broadscale accusations Said makes on Western writers. His use of Islamic and Arab terminology, themes, and motifs goes far beyond the surface. Analyzing the historical connotations and etymology of his extensive terminology reveals

¹⁴⁰ Herbert, "Men on Other Planets," 125.

¹⁴¹ Senior, William A. "Frank Herbert's Prescience: 'Dune' and the Modern World." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 17, no. 4 (68) (Winter 2007): 317-320. International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44809216>.

compelling insights into his broader commentary. Herbert demonstrates a familiarity with Arab and North African cultures that often feels nearly academic in its depth and precision. His use of Orientalism ultimately has two primary facets, aesthetic Orientalism and undermining it. Many of Herbert's allusions use Orientalism to evoke the "familiar alien" to easily engage ideas of mysticism, exoticism, and technological backwardness; however, it is technological backwardness that Herbert ultimately admires among the peoples he envisions succeeding us nearly 20,000 years in the future. Hence, Herbert systematically undercuts the traditional ideas of Orientalism. Although Herbert draws on a traditional Orientalist framework to construct a dialectic between the Occidental Imperium and the Oriental Fremen, he uses it to critique the moral philosophy of the Imperium while validating the Fremen.

Herbert does not preclude his Occidental Imperium from technological regression. He envisions the Imperium as a neo-Feudal state. It presents itself as a codified reversion from linear human development through the Butlerian Jihad in which "thinking machines" were defeated as they sought to enslave the human mind. This foundational idea remains deeply relevant to contemporary society and offers key insight into Herbert's skepticism towards technology. Set 11,000 years before the events of *Dune*, he envisions the Butlerian Jihad as a pivotal conflict that fundamentally changes the course of human history, which stops unrestricted technological progress. Written in 1965, Herbert experienced the initial push towards computerization and automation. Similarly, not far removed from the large-scale industrial horrors of the Second World War, in which it was proven that human technology had progressed to a state in which the entire world could be ended through the use of nuclear bombs. Herbert clearly worried about what the future of humanity would be not just in the next century but in the following millennia.

In his mind the current rate of innovation, currently unchecked, certainly spells doom for the survival of humanity.

Most crucially, he warns against the rise of “thinking machines”, referencing both Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon* and invoking “Jihad” as the name of the conflict that eventually liberates humanity from them. Over the past decade, artificial intelligence has advanced rapidly, and it seems that the near future holds another Industrial Revolution in which every occupation and industry will be affected. Herbert’s primary concerns involve the development of the human mind and the enslavement of humanity by these machines or the limited few who control them.

The ideas of minds being enslaved and not reaching their full potential can already be seen in an increase in an increase of reliance on AI by students for completing their assignments. This behavior can clearly bring a deficit to their own learning and competencies in completing tasks in the real world. Herbert’s emphasis on the development and control over the human mind are central to the worldbuilding of *Dune*. The most powerful organizations like the Bene Gesserit, Spacing Guild, and the Mentats are all equally obsessed with refining the human mind. The emergence of AI has enabled relatively small companies like OpenAI, with a workforce of just around ~6,700, to have substantial influence and generate significant economic impact within American society. Herbert clearly warns of a technocratic oligarchy that may emerge if powerful technology is allowed to be controlled by a select few. President Biden, similarly, warned of this in his closing remarks when leaving office on January 15th, 2025.¹⁴²

Herbert believes that a codified reversion from this technology is the only way that humanity can conceivably continue from this point. Beyond this reversion, he envisions

¹⁴² Joe Biden, "Remarks by President Biden in a Farewell Address to the Nation," *The White House*, January 15, 2025. <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2025/01/15/remarks-by-president-biden-in-a-farewell-address-to-the-nation/>.

humanity will choose to regress its institutions as well. The Imperium is primarily modeled after Medieval European Feudalism, with the *faufreluches* serving as a rigid philosophical framework that governs the different levels of the social system. In the system there is an emperor (the Padishah Emperor), nobility (Great Houses), a merchant class (the Spacing Guild), and a clergy (the Bene Gesserit). Crucially, Herbert does not portray returning to Feudalism as a positive development. Rather, he exposes how its foundations and delicate power dynamics promote totalitarianism, greed, decadence, imperialism/colonialism, and restrictive gender norms. Many of these elements arise in the same philosophy of “Increase and multiply.” Herbert illustrates how a codified reversion from technology does not necessitate a departure from this central Western philosophy. The Great Houses operate on a Machiavellian philosophy in which power justifies action, enabling them to rationalize their exploitation of the planet of Arrakis and the Fremen who inhabit it.

In contrast to this destructive ideology, Herbert Orientalizes and exoticizes the Fremen as a primitivist people. He believes that they are noble for the very reason that they are primitive. Instead of searching for constant improvement, the Fremen are more concerned with survival and spirituality. Their primary concern and form of wealth is water. Something so fundamental to modern society that Herbert initially constructs it with irony. However, it is the asceticism of the Fremen that Herbert admires about them. He credits the Fremen as the most superior fighters due to the hostile nature of their environment. This is counterintuitive as the Fremen are technologically poor in contrast to the Imperium, yet they outmatch any fighter coming from its vast expanse. Herbert presents this as environmental determinism in which the survivability of the Fremen in combination with their highly religious social structure allows them to become the superior race of the Imperium.

Similarly, Herbert employs Orientalism as a dialectic tool to highlight contrasting environmental philosophies. While the Imperium views spice as a resource to be exploited, the Fremen regard it with deep spiritual and existential value. They also understand and respect the origin of spice, emerging from the makers, Shai-hulud. Although massive monsters, the Fremen hold a deep religious respect for the creatures. Herbert constructs the sandworms as a manifestation of Arrakis, which is otherwise only an abstract character. It presents Herbert's deep admiration for ecology and his critique of Western philosophies in regard to ecology. He admires the Fremen for their cooperation and respect with Arrakis. The Great Houses, conversely, see Arrakis, the sandworms, and the Fremen as obstacles to be subdued and bent to their own will. Herbert uses spice as a direct allusion to oil and criticizes the West's overreliance on certain goods driven by greed. In turn these goods are pursued and exploited relentlessly at the expense of the environment and the peoples and animals that occupy the land on which it is found.

Although presenting them as the most noble people within the Imperium, Herbert recognizes that elements of the Fremen are ripe for exploitation. First by Liet Kynes and his father and then by Paul Atrides, the Fremen are easily controlled by their religious nature. Although both well intentioned, Kynes and Paul quickly use the Fremen as a tool for their own goals. Ultimately, Paul becomes a tyrant who harnesses the full potential of the Fremen at the expense of the billions that suffer in his Galactic Jihad. Herbert uses the exploitation of the Fremen as a two-fold cautionary tale that warns against religious fundamentalism and charismatic/populist leaders. In this sense Herbert was truly highly predictive. The Pashtun of Afghanistan were before the invasion by the Soviet Union, largely a disparate grouping of tribes interspersed through the difficult terrain of the Afghan mountains. They operated primarily on kinship and most importantly Islam. When religious authorities from the Arab peninsula like the

Wahhabi scholars came, they were easily able to radicalize the Pashtun into the Taliban and later Al-Queda. Similarly, Herbert warns against the dangers of populist and charismatic leaders, drawing on figures such as George Patton and John F. Kennedy.

Ultimately, Herbert urges readers to rethink the foundations of human nature and history: not as a linear progression of scientific achievements, but as a delicate balance between ecology, culture, and inner morality.

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