

Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres

“A Great New Pooling of Genes” Gender, Determinism, and Dystopia in *DUNE*

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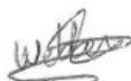


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"How many Einsteins have spent their lives washing dishes? How many Mozarts bent over stoves instead of pianos, because they had the misfortune of being born a woman?"

(frunkyfrogbait).

"Politics hates a vacuum. If it isn't filled with hope, someone will fill it with fear."

(Naomi Klein)

Jessica shook tears from the corners of her eyes. It was an angry gesture.

"You make me feel like a little girl again—reciting my first lesson."

She forced the words out: "Humans must never submit to animals." A dry sob shook her.

In a low voice, she said: "I've been so lonely."

"It should be one of the tests," the old woman said.

"Humans are almost always lonely."

(*Dune*, p.26)

Introduction

***Dune*: research question, state of the arts and thesis purposes**

Written by Frank Herbert in the 1960s, *Dune* has had 65 years to make an impact on its readers. The book won the Nebula Award for Outstanding Science Fiction in 1965, as well as the Hugo Award in 1966. Widely discussed, widely adapted, and widely studied, *Dune* is one of those monumental literary works that have shaped the science-fiction genre as we know it (Bera, 2013; Greenberg, 2021; Viberg, 2019). In a few lines, *Dune* is a story about the political throes of an heir as he struggles to keep himself and his loved ones from meeting the terrible historical event that he has foreseen thanks to his prescience, a capacity to see possible futures. *Dune*'s universe is one of an empire, where each important family—the Great Houses—reside on a planet and must carefully manoeuvre for their political and economic interests. The most precious currency in this world is the spice, harvested in the sands of the planet-fief Arrakis, and used in crucial industries such as space travel. This overarching, complex universe has been the subject of a first movie adaptation by David Lynch in 1984, a TV series on the third book (*Children of Dune*, 2003), and more recently it has made another grand re-entry in cinemas with Denis Villeneuve's *Dune: Part One* and *Two* (2021 and 2024), widely awarded through 2022 during the 94th Academy Awards, the BAFTAs and the Golden Globe Awards. Two years later, in 2024, the *Dune: Prophecy* TV series was broadcasted. All throughout these 65 years, *Dune*'s story has not only continuously been built upon by Herbert's son, Brian Herbert, it has also been reinterpreted and remade through the lens of screen adaptation.

There is a richness in *Dune* that makes it ripe for academic research, as each of its possible readings is worth analysing: while one reader might finish the book and be sure that they have just read a heroic story of natural selection (the finest warrior winning over his Empire), another would rather call Paul's victory a story of so-called 'white saviourism', while another might remember the political strategies, the ecological aspect and the futuristic technologies portrayed. Another one might entirely focus on the emotional implications of the book: the strength of family ties, and the profound desire for human survival. There is no shortage of scholastic attention on this saga; neither a shortage of fans, fanarts, fanfictions, adaptations and scholarly analyses. This thesis builds upon this scholarly abundance: our focus here is connected to controversial political aspects of *Dune*, specifically its universe's conception of gender, its treatment of minorities and majorities, its wider philosophy concerning human beings. Our thesis will thus be guided by this research question: how does the first *Dune* novel (1965), considered with its recent additions to the cinema (*Dune Part One* and *Two*, 2021-2024), deal with gender? How can we critically recontextualise the political, historical, economic, and other background features of its universe that impact its portrayal of women and men? More precisely, which aspects of this portrayal warps *Dune*'s social system into a gender dystopia? By portraying alternative or conservative conceptions of gender,

Dune delivers a rich soil for modern feminist analysis. This thesis collects and studies contextual themes in both the source material and in Villeneuve's rewriting, with a special attention towards the treatment of gender. However, the theme of gender cannot be understood in a vacuum; it is intimately linked to other themes such as conceptions of class, economics, history, education, scientific advancements and politics, as well as the wider genre of science-fiction, utopia and dystopia. Notably, through our first reading and our many analyses of *Dune*'s gender portrayal, we defended the claim that *Dune* is in fact a gendered dystopia that features warped aspects of a feminist utopia.

It is important to remember that *Dune* was published during the 60s, lending itself to the New Wave movement, which was a literary "introspective push" (Evans, 2016, p.4) that reacted to new literary works within its cultural context. At the time, the cultural discourse focused on "traditional patriarchal attitudes toward women, their responses to emerging feminism, and their sentiment toward the increasing role of technology in everyday life" which is also the starting point of a "crisis of masculinity" (Evans, 2016, p. 4). This crisis is said to be still active today, with a "resulting effort among masculinity scholars to develop feminist-oriented conceptions of manhood that may challenge and replace these patriarchal gender roles" (Pitts, 2020, p.1). As such, this thesis will focus on both masculine and feminine gender portrayals, replacing them in their contexts but also critically keeping them up to date. We will add to this discourse by analysing not only the first book and Villeneuve's first movie, but also the crucial insights that the second movie delivered on the gender perspective. Indeed, the movie adaptation made important changes to the story and the characters, diverging from its source material on some aspects. It deals with gender in a contemporary way that must be discussed since it interacts with our analysis of the original book.

The use of the movies will strengthen our analysis by bringing into scrutiny new elements that have not been studied before, given how recently the last movie came out (2024). Indeed, Villeneuve conferred a fresh aspect to *Dune*'s story, revamping its epic dimension with his masterful use of cinematography, score and screenplay. Translating the first *Dune* book into a marketable, Hollywoodian production is indeed no small feat. It required to reevaluate absolutely everything from the source material: what is it worth telling? Do we have screentime for it? How should we translate this universe's richness into visual or musical clues? Is it safe to show to all audiences? In those 65 years since *Dune* was published, the world has changed, even drastically on some aspects. The continuous adaptation of narratives has been a long-standing human endeavour. Even during the first nascent moments of human narratives, oral stories were passed down, reinvented, retold (Davis, 2005). Recently, there has been an uptake of movie remakes (*Nosferatu*, *The Lion King*, *Frankenstein*, *Highlander*, etc.), suggesting a wider interest in history and a renewed obsession with the stories of the past. Remaking and adapting stories enable their partial reactualisation. To make present audiences relate to those sometimes centuries-old narratives, screenwriters and directors

must focus on carefully re-staging all those stories in their ‘updated’ universes. Building on the source material, such stories strive to remain true to their origins while fitting into Hollywood’s specific guidelines, including modern political and contextual themes and preoccupations. This includes interesting changes made regarding the treatment and portrayal of certain characters and its impact on political conceptions of gender.

To a new reader, *Dune* rushes with strange, unknown words, quite foreign and linked to a complex universe that is being described page after page. It does not feel like simple worldbuilding; it feels like *Dune*’s universe had been there for eons, and we simply stumbled into one of its moments, rushing to understand what is going on. As we conducted our research and built our state of the arts, we realised just how much a universe such as *Dune*’s is particularly rich for academic analysis: because it concentrates as much information as it can but leaves so much unsaid, one is left drawing conjectures and drafting specialised summaries, since the grandeur of the plot can sometimes eclipse other features of its universe. In *Dune*, as scholars have widely discussed, politics have a predominant importance (Di Tommaso, 1992; Erman, 2011; Carpenter, 2016; Harrington, 2021); not only because of the complex political plot evoked earlier, but also because politics are profoundly linked with its worldbuilding, the narrative almost obsessed with politically and philosophically justifying its machinations. We are quickly made aware that the hero, Paul, isn’t anyone: he is the heir of the Great House Atreides, the main political actors under the Emperor. The story begins with an introduction to the Bene Gesserit, an all-female order of mysterious, witch-like women who manipulate the Empire’s politics in an underhanded way. Much has already been done in the field of gender studies regarding the female order of the Bene Gesserit (Kennedy, 2021; 2022; Evans, 2016; Lacroix, 2020), mostly on their formidable powers such as the Voice (Mack, 2011), their physical training, as well as their political implications. With their control over reproductive powers and their political influence on all powerful rulers, the Bene Gesserit have been described as a matriarchal, feminist order (Oliebos, 2020). As such, most analyses of *Dune*, be it scholarly or not, inevitably deal with its politics.

Dealing with politics implies an engagement with political debates, which in turn require a measure of nuance. Other opinion pieces have long since placed *Dune* in a climate of controversy, criticising its alleged white saviourism or heroic tropes in the book and the first movie (Durrani, 2023; Harrington, 2021; Erman, 2011; Kennedy, 2021). For all those works on *Dune*, close attention to the text uncovers conclusions that remain nuanced: in her article on *Dune*’s intellectual ableism and eugenics, Grace Lapointe wrote that “*Dune* is deeply critical of colonialism in some respects, but is itself arguably colonial, racist, and Orientalist.” (Lapointe, 2022). Likewise, what ties all those analyses together is this acknowledgement of nuance: *Dune*’s story itself aims to be critical, but criticising what is already self-critical still remains just as important. Any literary work, be it totally blind of its own tropes or deeply self-reflexive, would benefit from so many close looks

at its various themes. This is what the scholarly niche of *Dune*'s gender analysis should strive to do as well. We aim for our criticism not to simply condemn problematic aspects of *Dune* by simply preaching the prohibition of those problematic tropes' portrayal, at the risk of tipping over into censorship. We instead work with the idea that even if those portrayals are to be avoided, it is important to first stress why those tropes are problematic; to bring them to scrutiny, criticise them and acknowledge how such ideas impact our reality. This kind of analysis could bridge the gap between the part of public who routinely normalises these tropes, who is more at risk of breezing right past the critical aspects of a narrative, and the part of the public who is already aware of those themes and will easily acknowledge their impact. In this analysis of *Dune*'s gender portrayal, we will strive to keep those two concepts in mind: first, that *Dune* is a story that already critiques gender in its own way, and whose messages must not be lost; second, that its problematic portrayals carry impactful consequences for the real world.

We aim for this societal portrait, albeit fictional, to be naturally compared to our present-day world and to inform future readings of this acclaimed pillar of science fiction¹. Without a doubt, *Dune* will continue to contribute to sci-fi's ever-evolving literary discussion for a long time still. The science fiction genre is a "a type of writing about imagined developments in science and their effect on life, especially in the future" (Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary). By its very nature, it is a powerful tool to make groundbreaking gender discourse available to the public, playing with familiar and unfamiliar elements to emphasize societal issues and invoke deeper questions for the reader. *Dune*, as a well-established universe, fuels "representations, intelligent and sensitive, from which we can glean courage and learn" (Johns, 2010, p.175). Utopian and dystopian representations especially "facilitate the imaginative speculation necessary for generating new liberating strategies in a globalized world" (Ibid). As such, narratives can truly change a society, while its paratext can open the eyes of the public regarding certain issues they would otherwise easily miss (Genette & Maclean, 1991). By writing this thesis, by making the gendered aspects of such a popular science-fiction stand out clearly, we hope to give new food for thought to its readers, which will hopefully turn into a newfound awareness of those issues and new critical tools when consuming media. We ultimately hope to show that, spurred by those stories, learning to identify and debate gender tropes in media has an empathetic, personal worth.

Methodology

Most of the arguments contained in this thesis were first drafted during an attentive, thorough reading of the first *Dune* book, using the close reading methodology. Close reading is a formal methodology proposed in New Criticism that has been systematically described, critiqued, and

¹ Henceforth also referred to as 'sci-fi'.

supported through decades of literary and pedagogical criticism. (Lentricchia et al., 2003). This methodology “look[s] at how the language used to describe the concept, example, claim, character, scene, etc. creates and directs a reader’s understanding.”² We wrote down all our observations, copied quotes directly from the story that could support those arguments, and sought to gain a first solid base of knowledge from various sources relating to gender studies and our corpus. We selected our excerpts by close reading the source text, specifically looking out for gender tropes and themes that we have already noticed as relevant for our analysis; for example, men’s pain tolerance or physical descriptions. We chose the close reading methodology because it is our preferred way to read literary data; this framework enables us to remain attentive towards the text and is an efficient way of remembering important points for further analysis. The second stage of the pre-writing process involved watching the two movies, *Dune: Part One* (2021) and *Part Two* (2024), similarly writing down all instances where imagery, music, verbal or visual cues held meaning relevant for the general arguments we already extracted from the book. We also gathered sources to better identify these cues with theory, such as essays on visual pleasure and scholarly critiques of the portrayal of the other (Mulvey, 1975; Sassatelli, 2011; Rheindorf, 2004).

Since this thesis focuses on the thematic analysis of qualitative literary data, we naturally made the source material of *Dune* interact with interdisciplinary secondary sources. New insights were added to the discourse by reading critical essays on *Dune*’s gender portrayal, works on eugenics and masculinities in science-fiction, opinionated articles about *Dune* and feminist theory, as well as sociocultural research about gender issues. We sometimes used definitions from the Dune Wiki, which constitutes a solid database made up of a number of attentive fan’s research. Since *Dune* has been around for a long time, that its original mastermind has passed away and that its universe has been widely mentioned in many academic fields, a source such as the Dune Wiki remains relevant. We also used sources taken from scholars in various fields such as history, psychology and even quantitative scientific papers which subjects were relevant for our analysis. *Dune*’s literary discussion is commonly built with such methodologies, with textual analyses, new insights, and interpretative analyses of both the book, the movies and other relevant sources.

Our chosen theories are logically linked to sociocultural studies. Socio-cultural studies and gender studies go hand in hand, since ‘gender’ is essentially a performative, socio-cultural concept, as Butler defends in *Gender Trouble* (1990). The socio-cultural approach “looks at how a person’s experiences, influences and culture help shape why they act the way they do” (Waude, 2016), which is our main approach when empathetically dealing with *Dune*’s characters and their real-life implications. Inside the field of social studies specifically, we focus on gender studies and feminist

² The University of Washington, Tools for Close Reading Theory, Overview of Close Reading UW-B Autumn 2006.

criticism as theoretical backgrounds. It is important to note that gender studies and feminist criticism are not the same frameworks, although they are complementary and can overlap. Feminist criticism focuses on analysing literature through feminist lenses, focusing on gender representation and power dynamics, guided by its ideological and historical past. Gender studies encompass a variety of areas supporting its gender analyses: notions of intersectionality, classism, or heterosexism can therefore be used to examine how power relations involving gender work in our society. (Woehrle & Engelmann, 2008). Gender studies are thus a broader field examining gender as a social construct and its intersections with other aspects of identity and society: “Gender studies ask what it means to make gender salient, bringing a critical eye to everything from labour conditions to healthcare access to popular culture. Gender is never isolated from other factors that determine someone’s position in the world [...] Beyond studying gender as an identity category, the field is invested in historical contexts.” (Mary & Aksharagovind, 2022). In this thesis, both fields interact and complete each other.

That is also why we stress that we do not overgeneralise gender and behavioural features, nor do we draw erroneous causal links between them. Instead, we take “gender not as an element of explanation but rather one of interpretation, a tool of what might be called ideology critique” (Young, 2003). This ideology we seek to critique can be identified as *Dune*’s overarching gender paradigm. Our analysis of gender roles, or the analysis of “doing gender” looks at gendered character behaviour in fiction and points out how they can be explained and linked to real-life gender roles and societal expectations. The gender roles theory also gives a reference point for what can be criticised in performances and conceptions of gender and offers a useful framework to accompany the reader from literary data to sociological conclusions that could be useful for real-life gender policies. We seek to apply these theories to judicious excerpts from *Dune*, showcasing the uses of the science fiction genre in the making of a new discourse on gender, pointing out the revolutionary aspects of its story but also its problematic assumptions that would otherwise go unseen and unsaid.

As our analysis unfolds, the reader might notice that we use Villeneuve’s movies in a complementary way in our arguments. The use of cinematographic details in this case is justified by its relevance with the portrayal of gender in *Dune*. Social expectations about gender apply to both books and movies but employ different manner of actualisation; comparing them uncovers important narrative choices operated by Herbert or Villeneuve. In this account of *Dune*’s characters, we will mainly focus on book descriptions, but movie descriptions will also play a role in our study, as they allow a comparison between those “battles of cultural forces” and show how a later adaptation adds to this conversation on gender.

Notions

To build our gender analysis as clearly and accurately as possible, it is important to provide the reader with definitions for specific concepts, ensuring terminological coherence within our study. Those concepts are well-known in the field of gender studies, but need to be contextualised and established within our framework. They will be useful tools to root and nourish our analysis in its theoretical soil.

To decide if *Dune* can truly be called a gender dystopia, we must first define what a **Dystopia** is. Contrary to popular belief, it cannot be simply summarized as a genre. When attempting to define a utopia, Hintz and Ostry point out that the definition cannot rely on genre because “the form of utopian works varies” and thus give their definition of a utopia as “a nonexistent society that is posited as significantly better than that of the reader. It strives toward perfection, has a delineated social system and is described in reasonably specific detail. Dystopias are likewise precise descriptions of societies, ones in which the ideals for improvement have gone tragically amok”. (Hintz & Ostry, 2013, p.3). This is a general definition, but it is useful because it already makes the point that dystopias are generally utopias that turned sour, and that both hold “elements that are problematic and elements that are uplifting” (Noortman et al., 2021, p.72). Acclaimed author Margaret Atwood coined the term ‘ustopia’, “where Utopia and Dystopia are not exclusive states, but rather the one always exists inside the other” (Ibid). The juxtaposition of utopian ideals can thus translate into the dystopian features of a society. We will show how *Dune*’s complex gender system exhibits this duality.

In any academic work on gender, it is crucial to make the difference between **Sex vs. Gender**: gender, as a performance, is guided by social expectations such as gender roles, gender norms and stereotypes about gendered behaviour. This includes emotional and physical appearances, as well as life choices such as profession, the treatment of others, and one’s abilities. This performance of gender intersects with other identity criteria such as national identity, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic class, and sexual orientation. Sex, on the other hand, is described as “a determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females or males. The criteria for classification can be genitalia at birth or chromosomal typing before birth, and they do not necessarily agree with one another. Placement in a sex category is achieved through application of the sex criteria, but in everyday life, categorization is established and sustained by the socially required identificatory displays that proclaim one's membership in one or the other category.” (Butler, 1990, p.127). While most of our arguments concern gender, we do mention sex in its biological sense (for example when we talk about gender determinism), as well as sex in the sexual sense (for our chapter on sexual violence). The reader should keep in mind that these are three different concepts.

A second crucial concept used in analyses of gender are **Gender roles**: “beliefs and attitudes that involve stereotypes or preconceived ideas about the roles, abilities, and characteristics of males and females that may contain significant distortions and inaccuracies” (Rabinowiz et al., 2018, p.2). Stereotypes and gender roles are related concepts which have a direct impact on the social structure. Stereotypes can lead to biases, discrimination, and the reinforcement of rigid social norms, some of which are gender roles. While stereotypes are descriptive, gender roles are prescriptive, often implicitly: a textual description might fit or not into a stereotypical understanding of gender, but its analysis and reception always uncover real, effective correspondences with social prescriptions. We apply this concept to *Dune*’s characters to see how they are treated, if they act according to expectations of gender, and how these roles impact them emotionally and physically.

Thirdly, we use the term **Hegemonic masculinity** when studying *Dune*’s male characters. Also called “masculine ideology” by other scholars, the concept is described as follows in the APA Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Boys and Men: “a set of descriptive, prescriptive, and proscriptive of cognitions about boys and men (Levant & Richmond, 2007; Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1994). Although there are differences in masculinity ideologies, there is a particular constellation of standards that have held sway over large segments of the population, including: anti-femininity, achievement, eschewal of the appearance of weakness, adventure, risk, and violence. These have been collectively referred to as traditional masculinity ideology (Levant & Richmond, 2007). Additionally, acknowledging the plurality and social constructionist perspective of masculinity, the term masculinities is being used with increasing frequency (Wong & Wester, 2016).” (Rabinowiz et al., 2018, pp.2-3). Connell’s hegemonic masculinity identifies traditional masculinity as socially enforced and socially produced (Connell, 2008, p.245), notably through political institutions that have a role in the conception of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinities operate within the theory of gender performance: it isn’t a simple role model, it is an economic lifestyle, a program of conformity, complete with negative social consequences if one fails to conform (see gender role strain below). Not adhering to it is a choice that brings concrete negative consequences and insecurity, since any man departing from this performance “would not bring into question the integrity of the institution but of the individual” (Evans, 2016, p.37), punishing him by taking away from his social position and legitimacy as a person.

To illustrate the impacts of stereotypes of gender, gender roles or hegemonic masculinity, we refer to the **Gender role strain** as described by Pleck (1995 and 1981): “a general sociological and social-psychological concept [...] involve[ing] ten different propositions, each corresponding to a specific line of research: (a) Gender roles are operationally defined by gender role stereotypes and norms. (b) Gender role norms are contradictory and inconsistent. (c) The proportion of individuals who violate gender role norms is high. (d) Violating gender role norms leads to social

condemnation. (e) Violating gender role norms leads to negative psychological consequences. (f) Actual or imagined violation of gender role norms leads individuals to overconform to them. (g) Violating gender role norms has more severe consequences for males than females. (h) Certain characteristics prescribed by gender role norms are psychologically dysfunctional. (i) Each gender experiences gender role strain in its paid work and family roles. (j) Historical change causes gender role strain. (Pleck, 1981, p. 9). These concepts are thus crucial to understand and study how masculinities are depicted in *Dune*, how such models influence the actions and choices of the characters, as well as why they exist.

Two concepts that are overwhelmingly depicted in *Dune* and useful to explain its gender biases are **Gender essentialism** and **Biological determinism**: “essentialism is classically defined as a belief in true essence—that which is most irreducible, unchanging, and therefore constitutive of a given person or thing” (Fuss, 1989). It is a “predictable ontology that stands outside the sphere of cultural influence and historical change. [...] Essentialist conceptions that are deployed in explanations of gender difference refer to a belief that the difference between women and men resides in an essence.” (Manicom, 2015, pp.5-6). On the other hand, “biological determinism refers to the idea that human behaviour originates in and is dictated by biological entities or processes, either innate or constitutional (Rose 1982). Most frequently, in recent years, the causal mechanism is seen to reside in the individual’s genetic make-up, which acts on behaviour through the brain or the hormones (Fine 2010)” (Greene, 2020, p.16). In *Dune*, both theories mix: we thus refer to them as its “Gender Determinism”.

Finally, we refer to **Eugenics** to criticise *Dune*’s gender portrayal: “Eugenics was formalised as a scientific discipline in the 19th century by the Victorian polymath Francis Galton, who dedicated his life to promoting the idea that certain populations could and should be improved via selective breeding of humans. So entrenched were his convictions that he believed it should be pursued as a ‘jihad’, a holy war against customs and prejudices that “impair the physical and moral qualities of our race”. (Rutherford, 2024; referencing Peart & Levy, 2003). We use this concept when criticising *Dune*’s very own depiction of the Jihad and the Bene Gesserit breeding plan.

Research plan

In the first part of this thesis, we analyse relevant elements in descriptions and performances of gender. This includes *Dune*'s gender norms, emotional representations, physical descriptions, the division of labour in its societies, and the gendered education of the heirs. Pointing out those underlying conceptions then enables us to follow up our analysis with this thesis' second part, where we describe *Dune*'s history, its political system, its conception of women's roles and its gendered violences to fully appreciate *Dune*'s portrayal of gender in all its political importance. We then bring all those features into relief and fall back on our claim that *Dune* is a gender dystopia, using all of our findings to support this reading.

Part One: Tensions in Gender Performances and Stereotypical Representations

Dune's characters are described and act in accordance with a certain worldview which dominates the story, particularly motivated by survival. This dangerous dance of bodies creates an anxiety that follows the reader throughout tense scenes, sometimes even creating disgust or revulsion when *Dune*'s controversial rituals shock the reader's sensibilities. Many of the anxieties depicted in *Dune* deal with the fear of the other, which has become a crucial part of feminist studies with de Beauvoir's "*The Second Sex*" (De Beauvoir, 1949). While Beauvoir talks about studying female characterisation in its relation to male opposition, the reception of her work has led feminist studies to a new framework. Particularly, her famous assertion that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (De Beauvoir, 1949, p.13) served as a starting point for later works like Judith Butler's, who theorised the concept of gender performativity in "*Gender Trouble*" (1990). Gender performativity better suits a modern analysis of *Dune*: understanding gender as a social performance enables a reading of *Dune* with the governing conscience that we, as a contemporary, Western-influenced reader, always encounter new characters with the assumption that they must fit into a dominant gendered social norm, a yardstick constantly used to judge the acceptability of those characters. Furthermore, labelling a character as unfit to those gender norms, posing them as the "other", operates an exercise of power over them, reducing them to baser, abstract terms instead of fully empathising and recognising them as "one of us". (Mountz, 2009). The choices of words used to describe such characters are not innocuous: words such as 'witch', 'broodmare', 'monster', and descriptions of violence or animal metaphors are all laden with additional social and historical meaning. These words have been used before both in literary and real-world contexts, having therefore gained connotations that contribute to paint a highly detailed picture of this universe. Analysing their meaning and how they resonate with other literary theories permits us to fully appreciate *Dune*'s descriptions and their subtextual qualities. If a character is described with attributes that do not fit the dominant norm for their perceived gender, they will stick out to the reader and possibly bother other characters.

In *Dune*, for example, it is the case with the character of Count Fenring, who is a eunuch and evokes fear into Paul (p.511). When first introduced through the Harkonnen's eyes, the Count is presented as a "small, weak-looking man" (p.347) but also a "killer with the manners of a rabbit" (ibid.), clearly hiding great danger as the Emperor's "errand boy" (p.348). When Paul meets him, he realises his prescience has a blind spot; Fenring is the only one he does not recognise. The Count immediately appears as a mysterious threat, which invokes fear in Paul. When he learns that Fenring is "a genetic-eunuch... and a killer" (p.511), he thinks that the Count might be the one who will kill him. This example shows that in *Dune*, and more broadly in sci-fi, when a character

is introduced, they systematically go through an evaluation influenced by dominant conceptions of gender. As a result of such evaluation, this character will be positioned on a spectrum (is Count Fenring more or less fitting the norm of a man?), which is ultimately simplified in binary oppositions such as self/other, good/bad, etc. Evaluations of gender, class, race, sexual orientation and such perform judgements needed to define and categorise these characters. Binary categories create a sense of safety and coherence in the narrative, and the resolution of its contradictions and oppositions, such as the existence of another as a threat, generates a plot. Specifically in sci-fi, this battle against otherness uses extreme portrayals to convey this message: “more than any other genre in Western culture, science fiction seems to articulate the body as a space in which difference and otherness are negotiated. This is true of both literary and filmic articulations of the genre, but perhaps even more so in film, where a fetishistic gaze³ helps to literally turn the body into a battle ground for conflicting forces.” (Rheindorf, p.17). As *Dune*’s characters go through this continuous gender performativity test, they evoke reactions in the reader and other diegetic characters. Since this is not a study of reception, our analysis will mainly be based on other character’s judgements as well as narrative descriptions. This changes for the parts of our analysis that are made based on the movies, in which such judgements can only be given by the public since we have no written access to the minds of the characters, and for which we thus rely on visual details and diverging narrative choices.

In this chapter, we underline the tensions involved within stereotypical representations of gender in *Dune*’s universe. As we have shown earlier with the example of Count Fenring (p.14), the notion of gender performance and the underlying expectations of gender stereotypes and norms are related concepts, as we showed in our definition of gender roles (p.14). Applying such an analysis to *Dune*, this chapter will start with a corpus-based approach to *Dune*’s gender norm, where a systematic count of all its characters will uncover a possible underlying gender norm. Secondly, with a scrutiny of *Dune*’s gender determinism, we will explain the prescriptive social reasoning behind such an ideology. Proceeding onwards, we will then analyse how those rigid gender expectations can negatively impact the wellbeing of certain characters. What is important to scrutinise in this analysis is that once we have established a portrait of how *Dune* represents its characters, we must also see how they are treated in the narrative. Analysing a character’s presentation is a start but following them to their end in book one yields even more meaning: once the story ends, the characters meet their respective conclusion, wrapping up the messages that they were conveying in the story.

³ “Within the context of the visual arts or literature, fetishisation refers to a type of visual pleasure that derives from a fixation on specific acts, personality traits or body parts, transforming the character who possesses them into symbols of sexual attraction and fetishising them”. (Mulvey, 1975; Sassatelli, 2011).

Chapter One: Gender Norms in *Dune*

When dealing with gender in a particular fiction text, it is useful to first analyse its gender norms. To describe who is the typical Self and who is the Other in *Dune*, we sought to have a solid statistical basis on which to infer an underlying norm. For this we gathered a list of all of *Dune*'s characters, including unnamed and mentioned-only figures. This was done in part thanks to the Dune Wiki database, and in part through a personal rereading. A corpus statistics approach to the first *Dune* book uncovers the following figures:

Fig. I

<i>Category</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Unknown</i>	<i>Male-to-Female Ratio</i>
All Characters (Named & Unnamed)	60	24	11	2.5:1
Named Characters Only	49	19	N/A	~2.58:1
Unnamed Characters Only	11	5	11	2.2:1

In this table, we have collected all the characters mentioned in the book. We have included a column for unnamed characters only mentioned by a short description (eg. 'Unnamed Atreides Trooper' or 'Unnamed Stillsuit Manufacturer ') which gives the benefit of the doubt regarding their gender. For some of them, we have accounted that even this description strongly implies a gender (eg. 'Unnamed water-shipper' as male because their pronouns are 'he', or 'Unnamed Sardaukar Officer' as they are constantly referred to as 'men' rather than 'soldiers', or 'Unnamed Escort Whore' as a woman since 'Unnamed Gamont Slave-boy' in the context of the Baron's homosexuality implies that male whores are rather referred to as slaves). For the rest, we have adopted the most charitable assumptions to make this ratio as lenient as possible, giving the benefit of the doubt (troopers, lieutenants, and workers that are minimally described could potentially be either gender). Statistically, the results show that there are more than twice the number of male characters named and unnamed in the narrative than there are female characters. Despite significant female characters like Jessica who occupies a big space in the narrative, numerically *Dune*'s universe is predominantly made of male figures. This uneven description relates to the widespread observation made by literary scholars that there is a masculine norm in the first *Dune* (McLean, 1982; Kennedy, 2021; Oliebos, 2021; Hand, 1985). This norm can be partly explained through the patriarchal political system of the Imperium, the feudal society through which only male heirs inherit familial power, and partly because *Dune* spends a lot of its narration describing battles, which has traditionally been portrayed with male soldiers and uses male-centric

vocabulary, especially in America (Ferguson, 2021; Kiliçarslan, 2009); when the political plot unfolds, female characters truly start to show up. But this does not fully explain why the bulk of unnamed background figures is systematically male. When this disparity has been observed in literary or filmographic works, it has often been judged as the result of the author's conception of a default character being male, meaning that a man is what they will most easily come up with when they need to create a new character (Lindsay, 2024; Becker, 2020). This is called androcentrism: a worldview that "positions men as the gender-neutral standard while marking women as gender-specific" (Bailey et al., 2024), which in turn causes "people, both children and adults, assume a generic person is male, unless gender is otherwise indicated" (Lindsay, 2024, p.119). Lindsay identifies that this tendency builds into a vicious circle: "underrepresentation of women and girls, or overrepresentation of men and boys, leads people to develop schemas that assume males are the default gender, then lack of equal numerical representation" (Ibid, p.121). In other words, the more authors write stories that are male-centric or have an androcentric subcurrent, the more this worldview confirms itself. One may have also heard of the Bechdel test, created as a criticism for this androcentric tendency in movies. This issue points out that many writers, then and now, have a fundamentally skewed vision of gender distribution. Not necessarily malicious, a person's instinctual estimation of gender distribution would be linked to the prevalent societal tendency of hegemonic masculinity. Women's presence from public spaces has long been conceptualised as low, especially before women's rights movements were able to give them wider access to education and non-household work. As a consequence, their presence tends to 'stick out' and be numerically overestimated even when in a minority (Burden & Ono, 2021), enabled by human pattern recognition facilitating unconscious bias (Sorensen, 2021). In narratives, this tendency to conceptualize the 'default' character as male positions them as the typical subject of the Self, going unnoticed while the female Other sticks out, albeit numerically inferior. This is the case in *Dune*, where the few important female characters are praised to make the narrative less unequal. However, as we have shown with our table, numerical inequality is still well established.

Chapter Two: Emotional Representations of Gender

The emotional features of the men and women of *Dune* are deeply embedded into cultural conceptions of gender. Our analysis will carefully examine how gender relates to emotions in *Dune*: how do male or female characters feel and how is that linked to their gender? What emotional traits do they cultivate because they feel it corresponds to their gender's expectations? How do they react to the emotional gender strain if they find it hard to conform to these expectations?

1.1 Gender Determinism in *Dune's* Cultures

Butler's theory of gender performativity states that gender is a performance: one acts as a man or as a woman, knowingly opting for certain actions and behaviours, guided by a set of social expectations (Butler, 1990). If this theory justly points out that gender is a social performance, it is intrinsically oriented by the male-female binary. It does not make much room for other conceptions of non-binary gender: however, its fluidity has permitted Butler and other scholars to later admit non-binary genders (Butler, 2004; Finlay, 2017). In the performativity theory, all choices linked to the performance of gender are primarily externally influenced, despite being internally justified: "when we view gender as an accomplishment, an achieved property of situated conduct, our attention shifts from matters internal to the individual and focuses on interactional and, ultimately, institutional arenas. In one sense, of course, it is individuals who 'do' gender. But it is a situated doing, carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented to its production." (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p.126). Gender, in this definition, is seen as an accomplishment; anyone trying to "act" their gender has a certain ideal in mind (an ideal which is not set in stone, as gender performance is fluid and differs from person to person) that they strive to act by, an ideal cautioned by other people and constructed primarily through external pressures despite being internalised and performed by the individual. Not everyone will act following the same ideal, as all individuals are constructed by their particular experiences, education, and values. In other words, Butler's theory of "doing gender" that we have used so far operates on the understanding that one's environmental conditions of development influence their performance of gender.

This understanding of gender differs from the previous assumption that gender performance is intimately linked to biological sex, a "natural, pre-discursive characteristic of human beings" assigned at birth (Finlay, 2017, p.1). These competing conceptions of gender are part of a wider debate about Nature vs. Nurture, where Nature refers to "native, inborn, causal factors that function independently of, or prior to, the experiences of the organism" (Honeycutt, 2019) and Nurture refers to all factors influencing the organism once it is born, such as education, personal experiences, cultural forces and social repression. Arguments that overwhelmingly favour Nature over Nurture often conceptualize so-called "natural" features as the ultimate deciding factor in

human lives. This is, by definition, a deterministic worldview: determinism is “the doctrine that all events, including human action, are ultimately determined by causes regarded as external to the will. Some philosophers have taken determinism to imply that individual human beings have no free will and cannot be held morally responsible for their actions.”⁴ This last part is important, because this moral relinquishment could be wielded to justify their oppression of the other, labelling such a treatment as natural, an argument notably used in the history of eugenics (Honeycutt, 2019, p.5). Ignoring the biological complications linked to sexual binarity that we discussed in our notions (p.13), the argument of “Nature over Nurture” would therefore go as far as to assume that sex supersedes gender, or even that sex is confused with gender, stating that gender is also innate, binary and static. A performativity-based criticism of this determinist argument would point out that gender is an act, a performance conforming to socially agreed-upon gender features, and that the Nature argument mistakenly deem them ‘natural’ or biological. For example, we can criticise the Nature-based deterministic assumption that all women have a so-called ‘biological clock’ that will inevitably resonate with the need to procreate while young and say instead that childrearing is socially encouraged and that to conform to social expectations, many young women are taught to say they want children without being conscious of the realities of such a choice. Ultimately, the consensus is that humans are shaped by factors belonging to both categories: the question is to which extent, and how those facts are later recuperated to serve other ends. Butler’s original goal was “to trace the way in which gender fables establish and circulate the misnomer of natural facts” (Butler, 1990, xxxiv), which is exactly what we strive to do in this work as well. By pointing out the gender fables used in *Dune*, we aim to show that what is being presented as ‘natural’ for a gender is not always so, and that such an ideology can give rise to derivations similar to the Bene Gesserit’s plan.

There are multiple parallels between the Nature vs. Nurture debate and the universe of *Dune*. The “Nature vs. Nurture” dilemma has a long and complex history, picking up its source terms from Ancient Greece: Plato asserted that humans are all naturally born with a set of ‘innate ideas’, a theory reminiscent of *Dune*’s geriatric memory and its emphasis on genetic heritage. By the XIXth century, Darwinism and research into heritability took a dark turn into eugenics in the West (Honeycutt, 2019, p.8). The belief that a set of laws governing hereditary transmission could be scientifically founded and the pursuit of the politically motivated desire to improve the so-called ‘human race’ by controlling breeding practices operated a schism between the Nature and Nurture arguments, now conceptualised as totally separate causal forces. Published in 1965, *Dune* also evokes the Nature vs. Nurture question, notably by its use of eugenics and genetical heritability. This analysis must be contextualised; in the 60s human DNA had not yet been sequenced and

4 Oxford Languages definition.

scientific perceptions of genetics were different. What we see in Herbert's book, for example with the Bene Gesserit breeding plan, echoes real-life theories on eugenics and transhumanism which were a hot debate during the 60s in the US (Honeycutt, 2019, p.13). Concepts taken from those theories include heritability and instincts, which *Dune* exhibits in its worldbuilding, thus illustrating its story in deterministic terms.

In *Dune*, several passages seem to indicate an underlying conception of gender that is deterministic instead of performative. Most often, 'instinct' is a concept linked to the characters of Jessica and Paul. In an example reminiscent of the "Nature over Nurture" argument invoked above, it is said that Jessica has chosen to become pregnant on 'instinct', feeling that the tense political climate and her Duke's morbid reflections might take him away from her:

I have the Atreides daughter I was ordered to produce, but the Reverend Mother was wrong: a daughter wouldn't have saved my Leto. This child is only life reaching for the future in the midst of death. I conceived out of instinct and not out of obedience. (p.204).

A clear distinction is made between Jessica's decision to have Paul, going against her orders to have a girl because she believed she could produce a superior child and fulfil Leto's wish for a son, and her decision to have a daughter later, just before the Atreides are betrayed. Choosing to have another child out of instinct reminds us that time is ticking for the Duke, a fact that Jessica was all too aware of since her Bene Gesserit sisters have played a part in this plan (p.24-29). From the start, the Reverend Mother evokes 'salvaging' Paul but not his father (p.29), a moral dilemma that will haunt Jessica until her lover's death. This so-called womanly instinct to produce in uncertain times is narrowly juxtaposed with the Reverend Mother's lessons on animals vs. humans and the Gom Jabbar test, where resisting instincts against pain decides of Paul's fate. In *Dune*, resisting instincts is shown to qualify characters as superior humans—and acting on them is shown to be weak, animal-like and frowned upon by the Bene Gesserit. As justly pointed out in a *Teaching Review of Dune*: "What does it mean to be human? In *Dune*, the answer is clearly given: it is the ability to use reason and intellect in order to transcend instinct." (Schwartz, 2014, p.535). Therefore, portraying complex and deeply personal acts such as pregnancy or mothering as 'instinctive' rather than socially influenced, reasoned attitudes and decisions takes away agency from female characters, simplifying their choices as 'natural', an uncontrollable feature of their sex, acting on instinct as would an animal. This is not to say that 'Nature' never factors into these things; rather, our analysis uncovers the over-generalisation that comes with the *Dune*'s deterministic portrayal.

Furthering this deterministic portrayal of Jessica, her so-called female instincts are also evoked in the context of crisis:

"You must teach me someday how you do that," he said, "the way you thrust your worries aside and turn to practical matters. It must be a Bene Gesserit thing."
"It's a female thing," she said. (p.55)

In this scene, Jessica and the Duke are discussing the arrangement of their new palace on Arrakis. Because they understand the political stakes of their new position, they are both highly stressed, skimming around the subject of a possible attack on their House. Jessica, upon her Duke's request to "not get into that again" (p.55), returns to trivial and organisational matters of room arrangements after performing "the quick regimen of calmness—the two deep breaths, the ritual thought" which sounds like a Bene Gesserit routine. Interestingly, while the Duke attributes this to training, she rather qualifies it as a 'female thing'. Practical matters, in accordance with traditional gender roles, means household matters such as room assignment, which is a task relegated to Jessica.

Some of the character's instincts are presented as positive, even if their affiliation to 'Nature' rather than 'Nurture' is arbitrary. For example, Jessica, Paul and Leto are described as competent, well-liked rulers. Their skill for speechcraft and social appearances is often said to look effortless, natural and instinctive: notably, their use of the right voice tones and inflexions to soothe or lift the mood of their subjects or their impulsive choice of the right words to stroke religious sentiment (p.60, p.91, p.117). Similarly, Jessica's natural instincts also help her when she soothes and educates Paul. When Jessica interacts with her son, she performs her motherly role, but she is also said to act on her instincts: when Paul's spice awakening plunges him in a fearful crisis, she senses "from instinct as much as her own subtle knowledge, the precisely correct answer to calm him" (p.210). Her instincts also push her to summon Chani, the right decision to awaken Paul after his spice agony ("you may find this difficult to believe, but I do not know precisely why I sent for you. It was an instinct . . . a basic intuition. The thought came unbidden: 'Send for Chani.'" p.475). Both of those events seem to point out that Jessica, as a woman and as a mother, has a set of innate instincts concerning her son. Past her Bene Gesserit training, it is her womanly nature that provides her with a set of protective and manipulative instincts. The fact that those instincts are most often related to motherhood further contributes to *Dune's* deterministic conception of gender.

Dune also refers to instincts when Paul evokes the reason why Chani does not get to contribute and fight in the war: "Stilgar's instinct was right. I am stronger when you are safe. You will remain in the sietch." (p.457). Stilgar's instinct was that Fremen men will perform better if they know their women are safe—a justification for cutting their fighting force in half. This common assumption that men will perform better if they are told they are protecting their country, their women or their children has been used to motivate troops in real-life world wars as well (for example, recruitment

propaganda posters from WWI⁵); a manipulation tactic to motivate war sentiment. This type of propaganda is intimately linked to gender determinism because it uses the same gender preconceptions to justify its political manipulation. We evoked that determinism could imply “moral relinquishment [that] could be wielded to justify [the] oppression of the other” (p.18). This is such a case: men’s so-called instincts are used against them to persuade them to go to war. The Duke Leto echoes this propaganda technique as well:

He recognized a propaganda corpsman, stopped to give him a message that could be relayed to the men through channels: those who had brought their women would want to know the women were safe and where they could be found. The others would wish to know that the population here appeared to boast more women than men. (p.88)

Lie or not, the fact is that traditional gender roles and deterministic morality are used as a propaganda technique during war. In this case, a supposed male protectiveness is mobilised as well as the prospect of finding a partner once the war is over, since there are more women than men to save. This does not mean that war is a desirable activity; in a lot of cases, those men are being fed unrealistic motivations, as fleeing would most likely actually save them. The Duke, Stilgar and Paul here present a deterministic justification as to why Fremen women cannot take part in the fight while also using determinism in propaganda to justify war and motivate male fighters.

When instinct is used in relation to Paul, it does so in much more positive terms, especially compared to Jessica’s instincts. Rather than portraying instinct as an irrepressible urge that governs an irrational being, many of Paul’s instincts serve his survival. They act in explicit accordance with traditional masculine traits: his instincts augment his combat abilities (p.323) and his driving skills (p.246). Out of all skills, driving is specifically linked to gender performance in men (Flood, 2022); *Dune* showcases this when Paul is driving an ornithopter⁶ into a sandstorm and uses his training as well as his instinct to survive while his mother depends on his performance (p.246). Despite Jessica’s combat training, during their escape it is a teenage Paul who takes the lead, using his instincts to protect them both. Paul is often presented as a prodigy, a product of both rigorous training and astounding, unexplained skills conferred to him because he is the Kwisatz Haderach, the genetically engineered superior mind. His very nature confers him those instincts thanks to his genetic makeup which often guide his hand and his destiny.

Using instinct to give a deterministic reason behind these character’s actions further strengthens the Nature over Nurture argument in two ways: first, by confirming that those instincts

5 Kealey, E.V. (1915) Women of Britain Say 'Go!' Poster No.75, printed by HILL, SIFFKEN AND Co. Imperial War Museums. Retrieved 20 April 2025.

6 “Ornithopters, also commonly referred to as 'thopters, were the most common small transport vessels in the Imperium. Most 'thopters were winged vessels that were capable of flight through jet propulsion, as well as by mimicking the movements of birds.” (Dune wiki).

exist in a gendered way (reproductive and motherly instincts for women; political instincts, combat instincts, and driving instincts for men—rather in accordance with traditional, socially perpetuated gender roles), and secondly, by implying that these instincts biologically exist because of their genetic status. This also has the consequence of intensifying the mystic aspect surrounding Jessica and Paul, which they both simultaneously entertain and criticise.

These few examples illustrate *Dune*'s constant gendered portrayal of the Nature vs. Nurture debate. The vocabulary used in the book reminds us that in psychology during the 19th century, “nature-nurture debates were voiced in the language of instinct versus learning” (Honeycutt, 2019, p.2). In *Dune*, the debate is still ongoing, oscillating between stressing that skills are obtained through rigorous training (combat training or Bene Gesserit training) while also justifying the perfection of those skills as the product of the instinct of genetically superior characters. Moreover, we have shown that it does so in a rigidly gendered way, where women's instincts such as with reproduction are presented in a much less advantageous light as men's instincts, which are almost always survivalist and martial in nature. Through this deterministic portrait, *Dune* leans more towards a XXth century-based conception of Nature over Nurture. If it also likes to play with the Nurture position, where the characters' training and their innate instincts both play a role in their actions, its use of stereotypically gendered instincts and eugenic subplot illustrates a more deterministic conception.

On top of instinct, *Dune* also uses other deterministic concepts. In psychology, the notion of instinct has also been challenged: “in place of instinct, many psychologists made a semantic shift to using terms like innate knowledge, biological maturation, and hereditary/genetic effects on development” (Honeycutt, 2019, p.2). Innate knowledge and heritability are also important concepts in *Dune*. Specifically, the pseudo-science surrounding the Bene Gesserit seems to heavily agree with deterministic features relating to those two concepts. Heritability and eugenics are illustrated by their Breeding Scheme, where it is verbally said that bloodlines are carefully crossed so that “gene-markers whose supreme importance to the breeding program was known for almost two thousand years” were salvaged, transferred and improved (p.551, p.364, p.516). Their conception of human reproductivity, much like Jessica's ‘instinctive’ pregnancy, is governed by the assumption that “the race knows its own mortality and fears stagnation of its heredity. It's in the bloodstream—the urge to mingle genetic strains without plan.” (p.24). To produce the superior mind of the Kwisatz Haderach, the Bene Gesserit must plan counter-instinctually, as shown by Lady Fenring's seduction of Feyd Rautha (p.364). Drafting a general law about specie-wide reproduction tendencies, *Dune* adds a new deterministic layer to its universe. Nobody, men or women, can escape their ‘urge to mingle genetics’; it is instinctive, innate, inevitable. This assumption relates to gender in the sense that it deeply impacts the way the human is defined in *Dune*, which justifies the way female and male characters are treated. Bene Gesserit women are

‘broodmares’ (p.211) or ‘brood-mothers’ (p.364) who exist to serve the Breeding Plan; men are either expendable once their genes have been safeguarded (Duke Leto p.29 or Feyd-Rautha p. 364), or a mass of fanatic soldiers who long for battle like the Fremen. Later, Paul adds more detail to this fundamental assumption:

He remained silent, thinking like the seed he was, thinking with the race consciousness he had first experienced as terrible purpose. He found that he no longer could hate the Bene Gesserit or the Emperor or even the Harkonnens. They were all caught up in the need of their race to renew its scattered inheritance, to cross and mingle and infuse their bloodlines in a great new pooling of genes. And the race knew only one sure way for this—the ancient way, the tried and certain way that rolled over everything in its path: jihad. (p.214).

The ‘race consciousness’ that Paul henceforth often refers to in his introspective moments means that there is a race-wide consciousness that only he can access through his superior abilities. Much like Paul’s prescience, the race consciousness is a type of fundamental understanding of humanity, a knowledge of all the lives humans have experienced and those they presently live that allows Paul near-omniscience. Important aspects of human lives, such as war, are decided following this principle of the ‘great new pooling of genes’, pushing against genetic stagnation. In *Dune*’s universe, where certain women can knowingly and biologically decide the sex of their babies without technology, birth rates and wars are decided by this one law of counter-stagnation. This all-encompassing conception of humankind entails a certain view of gender that is tainted by determinism. In *Dune*’s universe, the ‘race consciousness’ and determinism are the social sciences that impact and dictate a myriad of facets of life: the Bene Gesserit use it to control their female members, force them to have children with men they do not love while they bend those men to their will with the Voice and implanted words that ensure their deaths (p.520). It is the ultimate Nature over Nurture argument; everything done by the Bene Gesserit and the general population answers to this one natural, instinctive law. Paul’s struggle with his ‘terrible purpose’ and his desperate attempts to avoid the Jihad war is, by definition, a struggle against determinism. The concept of race consciousness and innate knowledge further align *Dune* with the Nature argument, this time in a specifically gendered manner. The Reverend Mothers, after the Water of Life ritual, access the innate lives and knowledge of all the other Reverend Mothers before them, but cannot access male memories:

When a Truthsayer's gifted by the drug, she can look many places in her memory -- in her body's memory. We look down so many avenues of the past . . . but only feminine avenues." Her voice took on a note of sadness. "Yet, there's a place where no Truthsayer can see. We are repelled by it, terrorized. It is said a man will come one day and find in the gift of the drug his inward eye. He will look where we cannot -- into both feminine and masculine pasts." (p.14).

The Reverend Mothers can be in multiple places, but as an article justly states, “they are not just in many places but many *gendered* places.” (Hansen, 2024). Paul’s prescience and race consciousness are thus intimately linked with the fact that he is a man, but he is the only one who

can transcend the boundaries of his sex (and gender, since *Dune* does not separate them) in such a manner. By being the one exception to the rule, Paul's prescience is another example of gender determinism in *Dune*, stressing the importance of gender regarding innate aptitudes. Moreover, it is also a dig into gender psychoanalysis territory. *Dune* likes to play with gendered psychoanalytical theories describing the Subconscious; despite the concept of the Kwisatz Haderach being somewhat transcendent, Paul's actual portrayal and performance of gender remains very much traditionally male in accordance with *Dune*'s overall binarity. In his analysis of this aspect of *Dune*, Allatt notes that "Herbert's *Dune* is woven throughout with concepts and words stemming directly from Jung's theories on the human collective unconscious and its archetypes. (Allatt, 2015, p.49). Indeed, Jung explains: "in the unconscious of every man there is hidden a feminine personality, and in that of every woman a masculine personality... A man therefore has in him a feminine side, and unconscious feminine figure – a fact of which he is generally quite unaware..." (Jung, 1959, p.284). In this citation, Jung defines the animus and the anima: the anima is an innate image of the woman in the man (the feminine part of the man), while the animus is an innate image of the man in the woman (the masculine part of the woman). This notion of the 'innate' is linked to biological sex and is therefore already deterministic. After taking the Water of Life and having explored the "masculine avenue" evoked by the Reverend Mother, 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. For a woman, the situation is reversed." (pp.480-481).

This passage shows a very Jungian explanation of psychoanalytic gender, where this concept of 'innate knowledge' is evoked, and where in each man there is a female force (the force that gives), and in each woman there is a male force (the force that takes). However, this time both are more intensely divided, as if their psychoanalytic inner selves were hermetically separated, never meant to be able to meet. Only Paul, with his superior abilities produced by careful counter-instinctual breeding, should be able to access both avenues. When the Reverend Mother specifies that the Bene Gesserit can only access "feminine avenues" (p.14), she verbalises the general assumption in *Dune* that the force opposite one's gender is not just subconscious; it is inaccessible. While Jung's psychoanalytical theory blurred the boundaries between genders in the Subconscious, *Dune* uses this to further rectify their limits, making Paul the exception.

In conclusion, *Dune* separates men and women not only by their instincts, but also by their inner knowledge. It further pushes Jung's subconscious gender divide by adding two things: first, that there is a certain primordial fear of looking into the other avenue, as shown by the Bene Gesserit's reactions ("We are repelled by it, terrorized" p.14; "She glimpsed the place dimly before her mind blanked itself away from the terror" p. 480) and Paul's awakening experience (his terror after first overdosing spice pp. 207-214 and his Water of Life coma pp.475-483). And second, that

the male side is a 'taking force' and the female side a 'giving force'. Reminiscent of traditional gender stereotypes such as women being more 'giving' and men being more entitled to 'taking', this change intensifies the Jungian concepts, sinking even deeper into binary gender determinism.

Dune attempts an alternative description of gender determinism by adding a Jungian theory in it, but it does so by using a strictly inherent, binary and deterministic definition of gender. Since any individual is thus described as ruled by their instincts, this view on gender performance does not leave any room for individual agency. In the Nature vs Nurture debate, *Dune* offers a fascinating battle between the two notions, but ultimately justifies its gender portrayal through determinism, and gives the dooming conclusion that no matter what Paul could have done, humanity's fate remained sealed. This conclusion, built upon all the seemingly innocent examples we have analysed, agrees with Carrie Lynn Evan's affirmation that "[*Dune's* women's—and, we add, men's] behaviour and so-called instincts, along with the novel's presentation of certain biological 'facts' that govern gender aptitudes, reveal *Dune's* adherence to the belief in the biological determination of gender." (Evans, 2016, p.47).

1.2 Hegemonic Masculinities: Emotional Repression & the Triad of Violence

Dune's treatment of men is profound, digging into their emotions but remaining bloody and violent. A gender-related deterministic worldview such as *Dune's* has after-effects for men. Social pressure to conform to gender roles, the obligation to respond to outside violence and their lack of emotional regulating skills is regularly shown to elicit internal struggle in the male characters. Feminist scholars have two relevant theories to apply to such cases: this chapter will perform a first analysis of how *Dune's* men deal with their emotions, how they are portrayed struggling emotionally.

When speaking about masculinity, it is crucial to clearly define what we mean. We have defined Connell's hegemonic masculinity (see p.14) that we use in the context of this analysis, but we stress that concepts of femininity or masculinity are concepts created to try and simplify human complexity as inherently linked to sex or gender. These concepts are not as stable as we like to think they are: what was considered masculine in the XVIth century would be deemed unthinkably weird today—codpieces and the likes—and conceptions of 'virility' or 'chivalry' that were prevalent during certain periods of times in ancient history have in many cases become warped and irrelevant. (Murray, 2022; Piepenbring, 2020). As such, if today's discussions about "traditional masculinity" try to remain broader, defining it as "relatively enduring characteristics encompassing traits, appearances, interests, and behaviours that have traditionally been considered relatively more typical of men" (Kachel et al., 2016), it is crucial to have an uncompromising stance on such concepts: despite their important impact on our lives, they are unrealistic archetypes. Realistically, it is very difficult to essentialise masculinity or femininity correctly: their relevance and importance

are entirely socially enforced, which elicits distress or inadequacy in individuals who do not identify with these traits. In gender studies as well as in everyday life, it is thus important not to essentialise those concepts, at the risk of intensifying a standard that is essentially a group of unrealistic but socially relevant stereotypes.

As de Beauvoir points out with her theory of the female Other in *The Second Sex* (De Beauvoir, 1990), hegemonic masculinities build themselves in quiet contradiction with their own conception of the 'feminine' other. For example, Evans points out hegemonic masculine traits that are "defined in terms of independence and self-reliance, organized around attributes that sustain dominance over the so-called feminine traits of compliance and weakness [...] they typically include a competitive spirit and the physical qualities of endurance and strength" (Evans, 2016, p.36), qualities that women are not expected or taught to harbour, pushing them out of the public sphere and facilitating their relegation to the home. *Dune* illustrates and plays with these traits: Paul seeks independence from his mother's guidance ("My mother is my enemy. She does not know it, but she is. She is bringing the jihad. She bore me; she trained me. She is my enemy." P.345) and he is able to survive after the fall of the Atreides, saving both himself and his mother from a storm thanks to his fighting against other men. Even if Jessica isn't helpless and fights alongside him, clearly his physical aptitude is greater ("I can't run any farther", Jessica panted" p.251). His driving skills, especially, are what saves them ("Jessica let her hands ride lightly on the dual controls, feeling the sureness of her son's movements. She was frightened, yet exhilarated. Now, Paul's training is our only hope, she thought. His youth and swiftness." P.244). Although Jessica is shown as capable of fighting herself, she is seen struggling with her bitter duty of servitude and submission ("Only to serve," Jessica whispered, clinging to the Bene Gesserit motto. 'We exist only to serve.'" p.211) which Thufir Hawat, the Duke's Mentat, picks up on ("I'm not fooled by what your schools tell the public: you exist only to serve." p.166).

These few traits harboured by *Dune*'s hegemonic masculinities begin to map a universe where its characters are similarly entrapped into such social systems. Connell points out that political institutions and the economic model play a role in the enforcement of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2008, p.245), which is demonstrated by how *Dune*'s men act in political contexts. The economic context of *Dune* lends itself to political analysis: on Arrakis, the Atreides' spice industry must flow to satisfy Imperial demand, keeping a heightened control over their troops to thwart any political coup against their newfound position. On their home planet, planetary politics reigns upon their everyday despite their sure control over land. Those two tasks occupy most of the characters shown, the highest-placed elite, and is intimately linked to the lives of all men and women: "the books specifically focus on characters operating and situations occurring on a governmental level, rather than concerning itself with 'regular' citizens. [...] In other words, Herbert in his books already foregrounds the political dimension of life and indicates how it is built on power-based

relationships.” (Oliebos, 2021, p.13). A close analysis of male characters such as Paul and the Duke uncovers how the subcurrent pressure of hegemonic masculinity impacts them. In the first movie, the Duke quotes Paul’s grandfather, the Old Duke, saying that “a great man does not seek to lead; he is called to it, and he answers” (00:15:30, *Part One*), a quote that has become popular with the audience, as with the Litany of Fear⁷. In accordance with this statement, Paul’s story is one of political vengeance and grief, where a young man must make his place in this hostile world, while delicately keeping to the values and goals he sets for himself, spurned by his ability to foresee possible futures.

To critically analyse Leto and Paul’s relation to their masculinities, we use Michael Kaufman’s Triad of Male Violence theory (Kaufman 1987), in which he “aims to show [...] how the things we [men] are taught to do as normal come with huge risks and even higher costs” (Kaufman, *Man Helping Men* website), raising awareness to enable self-reflexion regarding internalised dominant conceptions of masculinity. Kaufman’s theory focuses on the analysis of the “social feeding ground of violence: patriarchal, heterosexist, authoritarian, and class societies” (Kaufman 1987, p.2), the reasoning found behind some of the violence perpetuated in modern western society. This tri-partite theory points out that “the violence by men against women is only one corner of a triad: the other two corners are violence against other men and violence against oneself” (ibid.). This triad is present in *Dune*: the military plot and the patriarchal political order represents violence between men, as well as violence on women; interestingly, the violence against oneself manifests itself clearly through Leto and Paul’s struggles and is directly linked to the political and societal context surrounding them. Since this chapter provides a deep analysis of their self-reflexion, it showcases this aspect of the triad in more detail.

In both the first movie and the book, the audience quickly understands that politics and duty occupy most of the Atreides’ days. Through the eyes of Paul, we can glimpse at his tumultuous and complex struggles as he grows, greatly influenced by his father, his role model. The Atreides house appears noble and loyal to their duties, especially the Duke Leto who is described as a well-liked leader: directing his men with friendly yet implacable efficiency (pp.91-94), putting the lives of sand workers above spice production when he decides to sacrifice a factory crawler to be able to save all workers on board (pp.128-135). Liet Kynes, the Fremen Imperial Planetologist, remarks:

This Duke was concerned more over the men that he was over the spice. He risked his own life and that of his son to save the men. He passed off the loss of a spice crawler with a gesture. The threat to men's lives had him in a rage. A leader such as that would

⁷ Retweeted by the official @dunemovie account with more than two thousand likes <https://x.com/dunemovie/status/1428431575050379265>, and reused by some as inspiration, sometimes completely misreading the message of *Dune* on the danger of charismatic leaders and fanaticism (Colpas, 2024; Trieu, 2021).

command fanatic loyalty. He would be difficult to defeat.
Against his own will and all previous judgments, Kynes admitted to himself: I like this Duke. (p.136)

He is not only a great leader, but also a good father to Paul, being genuinely furious at the assassination attempt against his son (“they have tried to take the life of my son!” repeated over and over pp.84-86), guiding him in political matters and treating him with consideration of his youth, a point further stressed in the movie when he soothes Paul’s concerns about his future: “I told my father I didn’t want this either... I wanted to be a pilot.” (00:14:55, *Part One*). Leto is described as a fine tactician and a man that inspires loyalty, described by his Mentat as “man of honour who deserves every bit of my loyalty and service” (p.106). This posits the Duke as a positive male figure and as his own brand of masculinity model for Paul; at the beginning of the story, there is no need for comparison with the Old Duke, Leto’s father. Despite only appearing for the first third of the book, he remains an important figure for the story. Yet behind his positive portrayal, there is also a darker side to the Duke: his desperation in the face of political peril gradually turns him cold and ruthless, which Jessica and Paul both pick up on. Jessica even confesses a sudden fear of him: “He had become such a savage, driving person since the decision to bow to the Emperor’s command.” (p.52). She blames Leto’s father for this, a figure that we never meet as he died before the events of the book but whose legacy ghosts over the Atreides, pictured by the movies (his portrait or his bullfighting figure 00:05:00, *Part One*) and explained in the book by Jessica herself:

“The Duke is really two men. One of them I love very much. He’s charming, witty, considerate . . . tender-- everything a woman could desire. But the other man is . . . cold, callous, demanding, selfish--as harsh and cruel as a winter wind. That’s the man shaped by the father.” Her face contorted. “If only that old man had died when my Duke was born!” (p.70).

The Old Duke, Leto’s father, was a great but ruthless politician who took bullfighting as a hobby and perished from it—the image of the matador fighting a bull (p.56 or 00:13:05 in *Part One*), as well as the outlandish tradition of keeping the beast’s head is one of the most violent aspects of the Atreides family. Not innocently, bullfighting has long been criticised as an inherently violent and cruel act, intimately linked to a performance of masculinity (Saimima and Mulyani 2018). Thufir Hawat, upon hearing Leto’s plan to legally confiscate the properties of all defeated Harkonnen agents, exclaims that it is “A move worthy of your grandsire, my Lord” (p.98), but other men look disturbed by his desperate measures (p.103). Paul describes his father’s reckless behaviour as “desperate, like a caged animal” (p.104) an animal comparison which in *Dune*’s narrative is always negative. This scene shows how, under political stress, the Duke’s positive figure starts to deteriorate into a resemblance of his father, who fatally died during a performance of hegemonic masculinity. The obligation of political appearances, intimately linked to a performance of masculinity, pushes these two figures to their ruin.

The figure of the Duke portrays a man at war with himself. Even though he is fundamentally described as a good person, a talented leader and a good father, the political turmoil he goes through and the weight of responsibility on his shoulders transforms him into a colder person. In other words, the Duke's distress is illustrated by an intensification of the negative sides of his characteristic ambivalence, showcasing moments where his positive masculinity turns sour. Strikingly, this is also a passage in which *Dune's* animalisation motif appears. When characters use similes and animal comparisons as a figure of speech, it is always evoked negatively (p.8, 67, 105...). Here, the Duke refers to himself as an animal: "I must rule with eye and claw—as the hawk among lesser birds" (p.109). Referring to himself as a hawk mercilessly ruling over his subjects whom he considers lesser, Leto's positive leadership image becomes tainted. It shows a less nurturing side of his inner ideas on leadership, a darker aspect of his masculinity where he does not rule with benevolence but with domination. *Dune's* whole point is that humans must evolve to surpass their animalistic instincts, which is why the Gom Jabbar test exists; Leto's comparison goes against this, makes him appear baser. Moreover, the hawk is the Atreides's crest symbol—something that connects his statement to the Old Duke, reinforcing the parallel in between them. Coming from Leto, this implacable logic of domination in accordance with the Imperium's caste system is surprising and uncharacteristic. Earlier in the story, he was the one who expressed that "his own dearest dream was to end all class distinctions and never again think of deadly order." (p.84). When the narrative gives access to his thoughts, we realize how much self-restraint he exercises and the real distress he is in: he admits to himself that he "felt tired, filled with the ache of not showing his fatigue." (p.45). Despite him being Paul's role model, the perfect male figure as a man of ideal masculinity and higher power, he is unable to communicate his emotions and distress. He masks his feelings for the sake of his entourage, to his own peril:

"I must mask my feelings, he thought. For the boy's sake [...] A wave of self-pity, immediately despised and rejected, swept through him." (p.84)

His denial of his own distress and his inability to share it with someone else slowly transforms his personality for the worst: he encounters trouble controlling his temper ("He knew he wasn't holding in his anger as well as he should" p.89), his previous cool interactions with his men only working because he "put on his mask of quiet efficiency" (p.91), hiding his real feelings for the sake of acting as a strong leader. His feeling of self-pity is proof that he is somehow aware of his distress and of the violence he commits against himself through self-repression. However, this feeling is immediately stifled, 'despised and rejected' as to never allow what he considers weakness, even to himself. This emotional repression for the sake of self-reliance and 'keeping up appearances' with outward shows of strength are all traits required by hegemonic masculinity. Leto's last months are spent grasping for desperate measures, acting with the fervour of a man who knew of his entrapment, felt his doom incoming but who believed in a better future, at least for his son (p.84).

Jessica remarks, that “he is angry and uncertain [...] He acts like a desperate man.” (p.145), echoing a later quote from Paul: “How often it is that the angry man rages denial of what his inner self is telling him” (p.458). Denial of one’s feelings, rage and desperation are all byproducts of a hegemonic masculinity model that dictates not to show weakness, causing distress to turn into violence. The other side of the coin about hegemonic masculinity is that consequently, men are posited as expendable: they must fight to conserve their position of power, dying a ‘worthy’ death (as shown with Leto’s attempt to poison the Baron while he is himself dying). Leto is a tragic figure who was sacrificed for the sake of politics: after all, the Emperor gave him Arrakis and planned his downfall solely because of how well-liked he was, which became too dangerous of a competition (p.4, and in the movie it is concisely explained by Leto: “the Great Houses look to us for leadership, and this threatens the Emperor. By taking Arrakis from the Harkonnens and making it ours, he sets the stage for war which would weaken both houses.” 00:14:05 in *Part One*). When the Harkonnens finally attack, the Duke suffers a final immobilisation: he is rendered powerless by a poisoned dart, literally stilling his desperate actions. Ultimately, Leto was treated as an expendable figure by the Bene Gesserit plan (“We may be able to salvage you. Doubtful, but possible. But for your father, nothing.” p.29). The Duke’s bleak ending is the product of the transformation of his masculinity model, abandoning his positive masculinity for the more violent hegemonic masculinity model of the Old Duke which encourages risk taking and violence. The Duke thus followed the political plans that he knew would turn himself into an expendable sacrifice to save his family, with no one helping him.

Because of political ploys pretending to undermine his family’s trust and his self-censoring, he is unable to be truly honest with his loved ones and first strives to completely deny his emotions. During the last scene where Paul and his father are able to speak to each other privately, in an important effort of vulnerability, trust and love, the Duke shares his feelings with his son: “I have to have someone I can say these things to, Son.” (p.113). He only confesses once he decides to bring Paul into those political schemes (“The Harkonnens think to trick me by making me distrust your mother [...] if anything should happen to me, you can tell her the truth—that I never doubted her, not for the smallest instant.” pp.111-113). Once he has started to unveil his inner turmoil, he is unable to stop and admits to his moral and physical tiredness for the first time (“‘You’re just tired, Father.’ ‘I am tired,’ the Duke agreed. ‘I’m morally tired.’ p.112), expressing regret for not marrying Jessica to remain a potential bachelor for political alliances, as well as cynicism regarding his status of beloved leader, attributing it to propaganda and expressing his wish to go renegade, renouncing his leadership. This shows how the Duke remained a fundamentally positive and moral figure, despite the destructive tendencies that he adopted through the Old Duke’s hegemonic masculinity. Leto is a character whose positive masculinity portrayal deteriorates as he becomes increasingly threatened by political peril. His attention to duty renders him physically exhausted

(p.170), and the extreme political circumstances as well as hegemonic masculinity traits such as self-reliance and the inability to share his internal state transform him into a more violent man, such as his father was. This self-repression exacerbates his darker traits; Hawat compares him to the Old Duke, a Duke who embodied a different kind of hegemonic masculinity. In this state, Leto elicits fear from Jessica, pity in Paul and confusion in his troops.

Paul, for his part, also struggles with the ability to feel his emotions. Although there are other factors at play here, such as the fact that he is a Mentat, there is still a link to be made with hegemonic masculinity. Paul's initial struggle happens after the Harkonnen attack: at the time, he is forced to leave his childhood behind, to step up and become the Duke as he accepts his father's ducal signet. In a sense, the book makes it clear that Paul goes from boy to man during that event. Instead of wondering about the fate of the Atreides House like his mother, Paul immediately turns to practical matters of survival. Simultaneously, he must grieve his father's death, but upon seeing Jessica cry he finds himself unable to do so:

Why can't I mourn? he wondered. He felt that every fiber of his being craved this release, but it would be denied him forever.

Jessica had never heard such distress in her son's voice. She wanted to reach out to him, hold him, comfort him, help him--but she sensed there was nothing she could do. He had to solve this problem by himself. [...]

Now is the time to carry out my father's wish, he thought. I must give her his message now while she has time for grief. Grief would inconvenience us later. And he found himself shocked by precise logic. [...] Paul heard his mother's grief and felt the emptiness within himself. I have no grief, he thought. Why? Why? He felt the inability to grieve as a terrible flaw. (pp.206-207)

This scene clearly shows how Paul's mother identifies his distress, but refuses to help him as some of his problems were now his to solve (echoing a conversation she had with the Reverend Mother, where she warned her: "Shield your son too much, Jessica, and he'll not grow strong enough to fulfil any destiny." p.25), if he is to become a man. This inability to grieve triggers a moment of intense distress for Paul, sending him reeling into a new notch in his prescient awareness, while his Mentat computational powers split his emotional and rational self, distancing him from his feelings and his fear at the lack thereof. Paul, in that moment, becomes what the late Duke's hegemonic masculinity would encourage: more of an unemotional machine than a man with feelings, able to rationally deal with data instead of having to feel his emotions. Jessica remarks that "there's no more childhood in his voice" (p.210), but there is hysteria and madness in him, alternating with his "iron control" (p.211). Paul is only fifteen at this moment, which makes his forced transition not only quite violent but also early. The weight of his father's revenge operates a similar change in him as it did for his father: it transforms him into a colder, ruthless schemer. Even as he fights hard against it, it eventually leads him to the Holy War.

This first moment of violent awakening and stepping into his father's boots is followed by a second "coming-of-age" passage for Paul. To be able to follow Fremmen to their sietch, Paul must defeat a Fremmen challenger who calls bluff on their identities. The other Fremmen call Paul a boy, a "child-man" or a "boy-man" (p.300), "a child who thinks and speaks like a man" (p.299), showing that they do not yet see him as an adult. This emphasis on his morphing status and the hierarchical combat that follows point to a link between the violence and Paul's coming-of-age into manhood. Ingeniously, in the confusion Paul nicks a gun from one of them (p.301), so when Stilgar remarks that "You will have your own maula pistol, lad, when you've earned it." (p.306), Jessica reminds them of the fact that he got it fair and square by beating the man, Jamis. This slight to Jamis' ego ("Surprised me, he did. 'Twas an accident" p.307), coupled with his doubt of the Lisan al Gaib legend and his animosity towards Jessica's tricks ("witch-force" p.320-322), will lead Jamis to officially challenge Paul to a combat to death. The Fremmen are notoriously violent people who are used to such rules, and Stilgar indicates "There are those among my young men who have reached the age of wild spirits" (p.313), thus explaining the tense domination politics of the tribe. Since Jessica had defeated their leader, Stilgar, and Paul defeated Jamis, the usual order was threatened. Paul's symbolic theft of Jamis' gun, and the man's violent reaction to the perceived slight against his status as a fighter forces Paul to kill a man for the first time. If Paul has been trained in combat all his life, he has never killed a man; his father's preference was that Paul would never have to kill, the Duke even being disturbed by talk of killing (p.49). Once again, the political needs linked to the Atreides House facilitates the sacrifice of Paul's innocence, Jessica noting that "The sudden need of Paul's ascendancy overrode all other consideration" (p.307), referring to her son as an "outcast Duke" and thinking in terms of military values. Seeing her son being forced to kill makes her want to shield him again, similarly as in the tent, but in doubt of committing a political faux-pas, Paul is once again left to deal with this as something personal for his rite of passage into manhood, this time involving violence of one man against another. In Fremmen culture, as well as Imperial culture (as seen with 'kanly'⁸, a combat challenge akin to vendetta) resolves political and social conflicts with old-fashioned one-on-one violence with blades, always between two men. In other words, hegemonic masculinity in the *Dune* universe revolves on the basis that, if push comes to shove, men will use violence in a socially codified context to resolve the conflict, once again echoing the violence in codes such as bushido⁹ or chivalry.

8 "The act of kanly was originally created as a way of allowing bitter disputes to be resolved without any harm being brought upon innocent bystanders [...] Kanly (kanlı) is a Turkish word meaning somebody who is involved in a blood feud (bloody, from the stem kan, blood). This animosity continued from father to son, until the last child was dead or the two families made peace." (Dune Wiki).

9 « Les combats dans Dune sont de type homérique et leur code moral ressemblent au bushido (le code moral du bushido des samourais) » Les Enseignements de Dune, 2020, p.20.

This fight is brought on by Jamis, whom Stilgar observes has “Too much violence in [him] ever to make a good leader [...] I've preserved him this long because he's useful in a fight as such, but when he gets this carving anger on him, he's dangerous to his own society.” (p.320). Paul must thus defeat a man whose violence seems overshoot even to the Imperium's most violent people of Arrakis. Suddenly, Paul isn't a boy but a man who must rise to the challenge (“‘Jamis, he's but a boy. He's—’ ‘You named him a man,’ Jamis said.” P. 320). Once he does, his status changes in the eyes of the other Fremen of the tribe: he becomes one of them, a respected man (“I shall not call you lad the more.” p.329), gets a ‘troop name’ and chooses a ‘name of manhood’ used in the tribe, clearly marking his ascendancy as a man. To the Fremen, killing Jamis in a fair challenge is not badly seen, and Paul inherits Jamis' possessions in a customary patriarchal inheritance system (a coffee set, his water wealth, as well as his wife Harah). Jessica knows that “Now is the terrible moment [...] He has killed a man in clear superiority of mind and muscle. He must not grow to enjoy such a victory.” (p.328). Yet, the Fremen's merciless lifestyle naturally changes Paul as a person, forcing him into more violence and conferring him religious superiority. A previous parallel had been drawn between Paul's features and those of his paternal grandfather (p.7), a comparison which happens again the first time Gurney finds Paul after the Harkonnen attack, after Paul has already spent months in the desert:

There was a hardness in the expression that reminded Gurney of the Old Duke, Paul's grandfather. Gurney saw then the sinewy harshness in Paul that had never before been seen in an Atreides – a leathery look to the skin, a squint to the eyes and calculation in the glance that seemed to weigh everything in sight. (p.445)

As Paul grows into his Fremen manhood and leans into its hegemonic masculinity model, he harbours the traits a Fremen ruthless warrior, but also becomes more like his grandfather, bending to both codes of masculinity. Not unlike for the Duke, Jessica also remarks that she fears her son (p.329). This accumulation of violence starts with the killing of Jamis, which is even more clearly indicated in the movie with the sentence “Paul Atreides must die, for Kwisatz Haderach to rise [...] When you take a life, you take your own.” (2:18:25, *Part One*). Despite his continuous battle against the Jihad, Paul's choices lead straight to war, as he feels when he first chooses his Fremen manhood name (p.330). Meaningfully, before fighting Feyd Rautha and making the final choice to start the Holy War, Hawat declares him his grandfather's son (p.512). Jessica also compares her son to the Old Duke, echoing his transition:

"Gurney!" Jessica said. She touched Gurney's arm. "He's like his grandfather in this mood. Don't distract him. It's the only thing you can do for him now." And she thought: Great Mother! What irony. (p.519).

The irony she is referring to here is that the kanly situation reminds her of the corrida performed by the Old Duke: for both, there is this unnecessary risk-taking, this recklessness to prove themselves as worthy fighters. The Old Duke died in this manner, and Paul might very well also

die from Feyd Rautha's blade. The circle of violence continues, and men succumb to the pressure of conforming to hegemonic masculinity by taking deadly risks. This is precisely what Kaufman theorises in two of the precepts of the Triad of Violence: violence against another man, and violence against oneself by adopting dangerous behaviours.

Chapter Three: Physical Representations of Gender

Dune's depiction of its characters' bodies constitutes an important component of a gender analysis. Rheindorf observed that "[the study of the] account of the body in science fiction film can also be seen as a contribution to the growing interest of the humanities in the human body as a 'battlefield' for cultural forces, a site where meaning can be negotiated and embodied." (Rheindorf, p.1). In other words, bodies written in a narrative constitute and hold meaning in their descriptions, which are intimately linked with real-life social and cultural conceptions. These conceptions operate on a set of social expectations held both intradiegetically (by the characters) and extradiegetically (by the author and the reader) regarding gender; analysing the way a character is physically described and how other characters react to them uncovers these expectations. For example, since the characters' bodies are constantly judged with regard to these standards, a reaction of disgust, fear or desire will hold meaning regarding this battle of cultural forces. A special attention to certain features will hold connotations that are similarly socially meaningful.

1.1 Dealing with Gender Abjection in Physical Descriptions

Dune is bursting at the seams with bodily horrors such as uncontrollable, strange inner voices awoken by the Spice Ritual, the loss of precious body fluids, or the fear of being eaten by the monstrous desert worm. Both Frank Herbert's and Villeneuve's *Dune* deal with the portrayal of the other in striking ways, manipulating the site of the body as a material that creates a threat to the social order; non-gender conforming and abject descriptions create unease about the categorisation of the characters the bodies belong to. If a character does not pass the performativity test, like Count Fenring (p.17), the usual reaction of other characters is fear. Julia Kristeva's "theory of abjection" accurately bridges the gap between gender performativity and fearful reactions to the other. Abjection is the psychological and cultural process of expelling or rejecting things that challenge one's sense of self, order, or social norms. This process dictates our reaction to bodies as "the result of more or less universal processes of human socialization, responsible for cultural phenomena" (Rheindorf, p.2). These cultural phenomena, Kristeva explains, are based on "historical junctures in U.S society", experiences and anxieties linked to a myriad of themes such as social fears, biological traumas, as well as economic, cultural, and political anxieties that have marked history in the last 40 years. (Creed, 1993). Similarly to the performance of hegemonic masculinities, the process of abjection is one of rejection: as an individual, we reject certain disturbing depictions of bodies as they are seen as a threat to our sense of identity and sovereignty. In relation to gender, this process happens when a trait is rejected as dangerous, 'unnatural', not fitting with dominant conceptions of gender (this can go from physical features to personal preferences or acts). The abject is what must be expelled to maintain a socially condoned identity; each time our fear of the other is triggered, we realise that this fear is never fully gone. Performativity theory and abjection theory are thus intimately linked, especially when it comes to

gender performativity. Kristeva's theory of the abject is in fact a psychoanalytical revision of Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque (Bakhtin, 1984), which has been previously seen as problematic due to its "apparent association of the grotesque with the feminine" (Rheindorf, 2004, p.9). Constantly associating female characters with the abject would indeed indicate a problematic essentialisation of women, systematically portraying them as monstrous, inhuman, unrelatable. In *Dune*, it does seem that most of the abject encountered is directed toward fears linked to the female body: however, we will see that some of it is also presented as an experience introduced to the body rather than a description of a body, and that one male character even embodies it.

Before plunging into this analysis of abjection, however, it is reasonable point out that not all bodily descriptions are necessarily negative; if *Dune* is a story about the struggle for human control over such biological matters, it is also an ode to the importance of human freedom. The abject, when in relation to gender, might evoke fear, but it is not always evil. If Jessica is able to intentionally select the sex of her unborn child to serve the Bene Gesserit's schemes, she uses this ability to go against their wishes in the favour of her love for the Duke Leto and his wish for a son (p.24). If Paul is a product created to instigate a terrifying plan for the future, a future where billions die in a jihad war to essentially reboot humanity, he nonetheless is deeply motivated by his ethics and fights to protect both his loved ones and try to avoid a terrific purpose (p.214). The horror of those unnatural abilities is nicely balanced by the character's willingness to use them for what they think is a good, noble reason.

But those characters can be wrong in their noble sentiment, and their powers can be abused. The first clear gender abjection that *Dune* describes is that of the Bene Gesserit 'witches' (pp.3, 18, 21, 28, 31, 494, etc.). We evoked the fetishistic gaze earlier and gave its definition within the context of the visual arts or literature (p.18). A fetish originally refers to an object, so the process of fetishization and objectification often go together. Visual arts standards are driven by the search for visual pleasure, both creating and fulfilling a desire for fetishistic portrayals in a vicious circle. In this view, women are not seen as complete individuals but as collections of desirable attributes; fetishisation involves a measure of dehumanisation, in which the characters are used to satisfy the viewer's desires instead of being postured as whole human beings. Fetishisation of the monstrous also plays with fears of the other; sexuality and horror thus often go hand-in-hand. This aspect of the Bene Gesserit has been widely scrutinised in scholarly productions (Kennedy, 2020, 2021, and 2024; Stamson, 2021; Kněžková, 2007; Meza, 2011). Their powers such as the Voice, their ability to bend the will of all men, and the mysterious goal they all implacably work toward induces the unease of many characters. Bene Gesserit witches are all threatening in the sense that they obey only to a mysterious common goal, which supersedes any other motive they might have. This goal involves the seduction and production of offspring in a way that completely instrumentalises men and reduces them to their reproductive task. It does sound familiar, as our society has been

intensely questioning reproductive rights for the last century: reversing the roles triggers an intense abjection. Physically, the witches of *Dune* are either skinny mothers of regal beauty like Jessica (p.53) or Lady Fenring, or frightening and old like the Reverend Mother Mohiam, fitting the stereotype of the old hag (p.3). Jessica is physically described several times, and it is said that “the lay sisters at the school had called her skinny, so his buyers had told him [the Duke].” (p.53). Bene Gesserit concubines are thus bought by Great Houses to maintain their advantages as women-providers and Truthsayers while being free to pursue their secret goal. To fulfil the order’s schemes, they must be beautiful as to be accepted by their buyers, but also well-trained and possess the genetical baggage needed to further the breeding scheme. This, in turn, gives a product-like quality to the description of Bene Gesserit women who are not old. Early into the story, as Paul is describing his first encounter with the Reverend Mother, we are given a snippet of information regarding the attributes of the order’s women:

"The Reverend Mother must combine the seductive wiles of a courtesan with the untouchable majesty of a virgin goddess, holding these attributes in tension so long as the powers of her youth endure. For when youth and beauty have gone, she will find that the place-between, once occupied by tension, has become a wellspring of cunning and resourcefulness. -- from "Muad'Dib, Family Commentaries" by the Princess Irulan". (p.23).

This is a misogynistic binarity: by this standard, a young Reverend Mother is both a beautiful virgin and a seductive object of desire, but once she gets older, this beauty leaves her while she gains mental capacities and resources. This binary depiction of women dehumanises them because it focuses on physical appearance when young, only to consider their interiority and personality when they are no longer beautiful. It is also a glaring double standard to evoke the beauty (or lack thereof) of old women whereas a man of older age is never described in this manner. For example, the Emperor is said to be 72 years old yet looks “no more than 35” (p.318). In comparison, the older female characters are all described as stereotypical ugly crones or witches: the Reverend Mother Mohiam (p.3), and the Fremen Reverend Mother Ramallo (p.376) are both described wearing obvious signs of age, brittle but also fearsome and featuring a certain “aura of power” (p.378) despite their physical weakness. This depiction of women in their old age is degrading and shows a stereotypical female duality between elder resourcefulness but ugliness and desirable youthful beauty.

While young Bene Gesserit women fit their gender norms to the point of perfection, they nonetheless make most characters uneasy because of their unknown common motive and their capacity for absolute control. This tension between the stereotypical adherence to feminine beauty and their deadly powers and mysterious motives incite fear and confused abjection: they present themselves as what we might expect of a woman but occasionally show that they are not as safely submissive. Jessica is described as beautiful, poised, and intelligent, but also becomes scary when her motives seem unclear, even being suspected of treason by her own staff in politically tense times

(p.107). It is notably said that the Duke, for all the love he has for Jessica, suspects that she does have ulterior motives linked to the Bene Gesserit but still chooses to trust her. Their enemies know very well that she will be the first to be suspected, by her own position close to the Duke and the general mistrust of the Bene Gesserit. While in the book, it is made clear that the Duke never doubted her (p.111), in the movie the suspicions over Jessica are never really cleared up, the Duke even having a discussion regarding his doubts with her (*Part One*, 1:11:00).

In the movie, this sharp turn from the beautiful, clean and poised concubine to the ruthless and dangerous mother she becomes once she is on the run with Paul is shown rather than told through her own thoughts. This is where her power as Paul's mother is fully questioned and the mother-son relationship is reevaluated. A crucial moment where Kristeva's abjection is shown is in *Dune: Part One*, when mother and son must rest and sleep in a tent beneath the sand (*Part One*, 1:33:00) where Paul undergoes the terrifying experience of his prescient awakening, when he first is forced to foresee a terrible war that will wipe out billions in his name. During the first half of this scene, the tent has a brown-coloured hue that fades into the desert sand. But after Paul's spice-induced crisis, the tent suddenly becomes red (*Part One*, 1:38:00), with sanguine-like veins carrying liquid, as we assume the tent recycles perspiration and tears into drinkable water. The movie takes the time to show Paul in this womb-like tent, prisoner of the horror-inducing spice that floats everywhere in the desert, hiding under the sand in a placenta-like tent to hide from the Harkonnen forces. This is the scene where Paul decides to accept that his father is dead, and slip on the ducal signet, symbolically stepping into his father's place, emerging from the womb as a boy turned into a man. These scenes are high in emotions, as it shows Paul's distress at what his body is forcing him to experience, and his resentment toward the Bene Gesserit order, yelling at his mother "You did this to me! You Bene Gesserit they made me a freak!". The unease felt inside this warm, suffocating womb causes Paul to lash out in one of those moments where he addresses his mother as a Bene Gesserit member, not as his mother and caregiver. The imagery linked to pregnancy and Paul's forcible rejection of his mother's reassurance plays into Kristeva's theory of abjection: the ancestral fear of pregnancy, intimately linked to witchcraft (Creed, 1993, p.100), the terrible moment of realisation that one is born and made by a woman (here, by an order of women), manipulated to become exactly what they had intended, no matter the emotional costs nor the consent of such a child. Interestingly, in the book, this intense psychosis is presented in a different way: when Paul is experiencing his awakening, he is still angry at the Bene Gesserit and Jessica, but it seems that her reminder of her status as his mother, and not just a Bene Gesserit serving her order ("What have you done to me?" he demanded. In a burst of clarity, she sensed some of the roots in the question, said: "I gave birth to you." p.209), is "the precisely correct answer to calm him" (p.210). Yet Paul rejects her reassurance, not falling for her soothing words. In the book, the real horror of the situation rather comes from his realisation that the spice awoke something that

was sleeping inside him (the prescience), but also the fact that they are effectively stuck on Arrakis, slave to their unwanted, new spice addiction:

We're trapped here, she agreed. And she accepted the truth of his words. No pressure of the Bene Gesserit, no trickery or artifice could pry them completely free from Arrakis: the spice was addictive. Her body had known the fact long before her mind awakened to it. So here we live out our lives, she thought, on this hell-planet. The place is prepared for us, if we can evade the Harkonnens. And there's no doubt of my course: a broodmare preserving an important bloodline for the Bene Gesserit Plan. [...] "Only to serve," Jessica whispered, clinging to the Bene Gesserit motto. "We exist only to serve." (p.211).

Addiction to an unseen substance that uncontrollably contaminates them through air and food, and the brutal obligation that binds their very bodies to the Bene Gesserit Plan: this is abjection. Jessica has lost all pretence of normalcy when she lost her Duke and is now more aware than ever of her role as a 'broodmare'. This word animalizes Jessica in another fit of abjection, reducing herself to an animal whose primary function is her uterus. Moreover, Paul harshly describes the "inbred, patrician lines of her face" (p.214) as he realizes they are Harkonnen through her bloodline. While the Bene Gesserit breeding scheme is designed for the betterment of humanity (explained in the book's "Appendix III: Report on Bene Gesserit Motives and Purposes", in which it is referred that Jessica "should have been a willing tool" p.551), the choices made by the Sisters and their consequences are regularly criticised. Using the verb 'breeding' (p.551), the verb 'sired' (p.193) and the adjective 'inbred' indicate a play with animalistic conceptions of reproduction and incestual anxieties about inbreeding. We are thus led to read about Jessica as a powerful, politically apt and beautiful concubine; a dangerous Bene Gesserit devoted to a mysterious plan; a devoted mother and secretive, yet loving wife; and a being that disgusts Paul because of her origins and her seemingly selfish choice of birthing him, knowing he might be the Kwisatz Haderach.

Jessica's bodily transformations are subject to important changes between media. While in the movie, Jessica still hopes to get off-world and return to Caladan, book Jessica accepts that she is trapped and thus later works hard to integrate the Fremmen. This leads to a second, crucial passage regarding bodily changes and the abject: that of the Water of Life ritual. Later in the book, Jessica manoeuvres the Fremmen tribe's rules and politics to undergo the Water of Life ritual and become a Reverend Mother, securing her and Paul's safety while they hide and granting them legitimacy through religion for their eventual revenge. This passage plunges deep into Jessica's biological reactions (p.380), down to the cellular and chemical level, following the Water of Life's poison inside her body as she struggles to convert it and protect her unborn daughter. This is, again, another example of Kristeva's abjection: the half-unwilling injection of poison through the mouth into the body, Jessica "fighting to retain her calmness and dignity" (p.380) as the whole sietch looks on. This passage also stresses the near-absolute control she has over her body, cementing her as a strong person, but also putting her sovereignty to the test as different consciousnesses enter her through her newfound geriatric memory bond. Described as the "ultimate simpatico, being two

people at once: not telepathy, but mutual awareness” (p.382), Jessica meets the old Reverent Mother Ramallo, as well as countless older Reverend Mothers. The experience leads her to recoil several times, “fearing she would become lost in an ocean of oneness”, as a traditional view of self stays strictly within one person. This fear of being overtaken by the other is also experienced by Paul and by Alia. While Jessica dominates herself throughout this experience, Villeneuve’s take on the Water of Life ritual involves much more reluctance. In the movie, Jessica does not want to stay with the Fremen, only obeying her son’s initial wish to enter the tribe for revenge (*Part Two*, 00:17:00) and considering taking the Reverend Mother’s role because Stilgar makes it clear that the Lisan al Gaib’s mother must be a Reverend Mother. Without that title and without guarantee that Paul is the Mahdi, she and Paul have no place in the tribe. In the movie, the scene of the ritual itself is much different: taking place away from the tribe’s eyes, and with very little sacred feeling since many younger Fremen are dubious toward religion, Jessica declares to Paul beforehand that it was a “choice between this or death, so forgive me if I’m not flattered” (*Part Two*, 00:22:00), even going as far as being forced to drink through the Voice being used on her. The scene shows the poison entering her as well but is much more explicit in terms of physical harm (she is having seizures and a nosebleed), truly horrific thanks to the stressful music and picturing her unborn foetus being assaulted with the liquid. The episode is demystified, criticised and shown as barbaric through the other Fremen’s disapproval and the violence of the scene. This marks another divergence from book Jessica’s character. In the movie, she emerges from this experience completely unstable: overcome by the other consciences as she speaks the Fremen tongue with bright blue eyes that are not hers (another touch of the abject), completely absorbed into the mystique of the prophecy, speaking to her womb, twitching and doing everything she can to “convert the nonbelievers” to protect Paul (*Part Two*, 00:34:00), echoing her son’s initial tactic for revenge (although he has now changed his mind, instead being critical of the Bene Gesserit’s manipulation of the Fremen through religion). This Jessica is the epitome of the abject: a pregnant, crazed woman with unnatural abilities, who has ingested a strange, mind-altering liquid, and who is acting with implacable, calculated coldness to spread religious fanaticism into the tribe. Further displeasing Paul and alienating herself from him, she fully leans into the role of the Mahdi’s mother, even tattooing her whole face to symbolize this impressive change: “there’s some kind of madness in writing elements of the prophecies on her face”, notes Villeneuve (Jones, 2024). Indeed, since tattoos in Western culture have closely been related with torture and criminality, the importance of text being etched into the body is socially very striking (Rheindorf, 2004, p.7), intensifying the abjection of her post-Water of Life ritual description. In opposition, when Paul drinks the Water of Life, he is not shown struggling and losing control, the movie instead showing his vision, skipping his reaction and simply showing him asleep. His post-ritual appearance is treated as the awakening of a God, with better control over everything now that he can see the future. This strong difference between mother and son is not stated in the book, where both events

are deeply ritualistic and mystified. While the book treats this particular event as a religious, deeply sentimental experience, the movie portrays Jessica's Water of Life ritual in a much more abject way than Paul's own experience, choosing to emphasize Paul's awakening as the Lisan al Gaib and Jessica's abject weirdness. This is relevant to *Dune's* gender analysis: the abject, in a movie, is chosen to represent a woman's experience while the male main character preserves his dignity.

This abject unease about a person being overtaken by the other is further embodied by Paul's sister, Alia: having ingested the Water of Life with Jessica, she has awoken with all the memories of the other Reverend Mothers when she was in the womb, defenceless. The result is a baby that speaks and acts like an adult, which deeply unnerves the Fremmen and embodies the biggest sin a Bene Gesserit could ever do. As we have said earlier, it is worth mentioning that not everything about bodily portrayal is abject. In the book, specifically, Jessica's protection of her unborn daughter at the moment of the Ritual constitutes a rare moment of raw emotional vulnerability, Jessica "reducing herself to basic emotional reactions, radiated love, comfort, a warm snuggling of protection" and her daughter already giving back a "tiny outflowing of love-comfort, like a reflection of what she had poured into it" (p.384).

Looking at the portrayal of Jessica's pregnancy, we see that Alia's presentation undergoes change in *Dune's* adaptation. She does not appear as she does in the book: instead of being presented as a toddler after a time skip of a few years living amidst the Fremmen, Alia already makes an appearance as a foetus. She is strongly present, being shown and referred to regularly through Paul's enquiries of his sister, Jessica's nonverbal gesture of protection towards her belly in both movies, and even through her voicing the unborn Alia's requests (1:01:00, *Part Two*). She even makes an appearance as a fully formed woman (1:53:40, *Part Two*, played by Anya Taylor-Joy) in a vision from the future. However, the movie seems to skilfully avoid presenting Alia as the embodiment of the abject that she is in the book; importantly, the Reverend Mother Mohiam refers to Paul as an 'Abomination' (2:25:55, *Part Two*), a title that was reserved to Alia in the book. While in the movie, the foetus can already communicate and is shown humanlike thanks to its capacity for verbal communication though Jessica and its visual presence such as with the 'open eye' during the Water of Life ritual (0:25:50, *Part Two*), in the book Alia does not have verbal thoughts in utero, Jessica only sensing her through the most basic human senses, that of emotions.

Changing Alia's first descriptions in the movie adaptation constitutes quite the important political choice, not only because it touches the question of a foetus' personhood, but also notably because it takes away from Jessica's integrity. Her character does not only act or speak from her own agency and mind because her body is shared with Alia's and she verbalises her daughter's thoughts (*Part Two*, 1:00:50). We have also shown in the previous point that Jessica's portrayal is already twisted into the abject compared to her character in the book. At the time of Villeneuve's

adaptation, and especially in American society, such portrayal is a politically loaded statement since the right to abortion and foetus personhood are subjects being actively debated¹⁰.

The third character that is portrayed with a heavy dose of abjection is the Baron Vladimir Harkonnen. As he is unveiled from the shadows at the start of the second chapter, the description first starts with his more usual attributes: a 'basso voice' and a 'fat hand' (p.15). If the reader does not yet know what the Baron looks like, we can judge from the other characters' reactions to him that he is scary, ugly and powerful; Feyd-Rautha uses the words 'old monster' (p.20). When we are finally allowed to see the Baron, he is described as 'grossly and immensely fat, 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' (p.23), and he concludes his first scene by stating he is hungry, something that reoccurs often (p.23, 193, 200). The Baron is one of the only male characters described with such an attention to fatness. While most men in *Dune* are muscled warriors or slim politicians, the Baron's character horrifies by his fatness; in a universe where the male body is a finely wrought weapon, the Baron essentially refuses this function. In *Dune*, physical fighting abilities decide the political destiny of entire families, and male heirs and other warrior figures are trained to make their bodies into a weapon. Yet the Baron appears as this grotesque, fat anomaly of a man who has ascended to power through political manipulation and commerce (as we learn in the Appendix IV, p.555) and enjoys his riches without restraint, his greatest weapon being his wealth and his skill as a politician. Contrarily to his heir Feud-Rautha (who is a trained warrior, described as "one who won't let himself go to fat" p.346), the Baron is so fat that he cannot hold his own weight without the aid of technology (p.23). He clearly opposes to the self-reliant quality that would be expected of a powerful ruler by hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, his paedophilic tastes based on the depraved homosexual trope¹¹ turns him into "the very antithesis of the heteroreproductive, forward-looking thrust of *Dune's* narrative" (West, 2023) as seen with the Bene Gesserit plan, which effectively positions him in an "abject position" (Ibid).

The way the Baron is described better finds its theory in Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque, later re-evaluated by Kristeva. Bakhtin first wrote this theory as a commentary on Rabelais' novels *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua*, both figures easily comparable to the way the Baron is portrayed: the obese, cruel, all-consuming monster. The Baron's character is one of the archetypal villains, an amalgam of the scary physique of Rabelais' two formidable characters (once representing Renaissance humanist ideals) and the power-hungry tyranny of Picrochole. There are two main

10 "On June 24, 2022, the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, eliminating the federal constitutional standard that had protected the right to abortion. Without any federal standard regarding abortion access, states will set their own policies to ban or protect abortion." See reproductiverights.org and kff.org.

¹¹ See *Depraved Homosexual*, TV Tropes.

points of abjection characterising the Baron: first, his imposing body, being partly held up by portable suspensors; second, his never-ending hunger. The Baron is often shown declaring his hunger, and often eating, an act which Bakhtin describes as grotesque, as “the body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, child-birth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation.” (Bakhtin, 1984, p.26). All the Baron’s eating scenes thus appear distinctly disgusting to any witness, both in the book and in the movie, especially when he uses it as a show of dominance over an immobilised Duke Leto (pp. 192-196; timestamp 1:28:00 in *Part One*). In Kristeva’s updated version of the theory of abjection, she observes that “food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection” (Kristeva, 2010, p.2). The Baron explains it himself to his nephew Rabban; his eating habits are directly correlated to power:

“You must be the carnivore, my boy.” He smiled, a baby’s expression in the dimple-fat face. “A carnivore never stops. Show no mercy. Never stop. Mercy is a chimera. It can be defeated by the stomach rumbling its hunger, by the throat crying its thirst. You must be always hungry and thirsty.” The Baron caressed his bulges beneath the suspensors. “Like me.” (P. 257)

In this passage, the Baron explains that he absorbs delicious, expensive food as a show of power, because he can afford not only to eat exquisitely, but also as often as he wishes, growing his fat body certainly not as a powerful warrior but as a political weapon nonetheless by his imposing nature. Often, we are led to see the Baron through the eyes of other characters, all simultaneously repulsed and terrorized by his presence. That he is trying to pass this political wisdom on to his nephew constitutes a notable rebellious moment from the Baron, as he clearly rejects what is expected of a powerful man: mercy, restraint, fitness, all qualities subject to praise regularly exhibited by his nemesis and cousin, the Duke Atreides. Here, the abject comes from the Baron’s adherence to a stereotype, that of the archetypal villain who is hungry for food and power. The Baron is one of the most powerful men of the Imperium, yet he is described negatively to the likeness of an overgrown baby (as shown by the use of the ‘baby fat’ expression: pp. 194, 257, 346, etc.), and a ‘pig’ (p.402). The use of the word ‘carnivore’ and ‘pig’ in reference to him echoes with one of *Dune*’s most important themes, the difference between a human and an animal. The word ‘carnivore’ is most often used when referring to an animal and seems more incongruous when applied to a human; as such, the Baron unwittingly animalises himself just as much as other characters compare him to an animal. This calls back to the animalisation motif we uncovered with the Duke earlier (pp.32-33), further exemplifying the negative aspect of that kind of figure of speech in *Dune*.

Alas, the abject must be safely dealt with; the Baron is also a slave to his hunger compulsions. As his defeat grows near, his hunger manifests itself in new ways:

Fear sat like a stone in his stomach until he could hardly bear the thought of eating. Yet, the feeling was like hunger, and he poised himself several times in his suspensors on the point of ordering food brought to him. But there was no one here to obey his summons. (pp. 496).

This passage shows the Baron in a context in which requesting food is impossible. If the Baron's hunger is a show of power, it is also a way of keeping himself afloat, because fulfilling this impulse to eat reassures himself. This short description goes deep into his situation: the Baron, once the carnivore predator, now knows fear, and confuses this feeling with his previous hungry compulsions that have served as his reminder of his assured power. Yet, now dispossessed of his political upper-hand, in the presence of an even greater power (the Imperial Court and the Emperor, described by the Baron as "slim", his voice with "exquisite control" in a clear contrast to himself pp. 493-494), he has no access to food, no one to order around. He has become powerless. In the movie, his death scene further demonstrates the victory of an ideal male figure, Paul, against the animalistic, vulnerable Baron, unable to move without his support ("You die like an animal", 2:21:00, *Part Two*) while his heir Feyd Rautha and the Emperor's soldiers watch without intervening.

When we have earlier stated, through Rheindorf's words, that the sci-fi genre turns the body into a battle ground for conflicting forces, the statement implied that there is an outcome to this battle. In this chapter, we have seen three different battles against the abject: a battle on the feminine other, Jessica; a battle on bodily sovereignty, with Paul and Jessica's Water of Life ritual and her pregnancy; and a battle on the male grotesque, the Baron Vladimir Harkonnen, entirely defeated and killed in both book and movie. Through these three battles, *Dune's* story plays with these themes but ultimately restores the traditional order by repressing the abject. In Kristeva's theory, the science-fiction genre is described to have a role in maintaining these divisions (described in psychoanalytical terms in her work), ultimately restoring the symbolic order by repressing the abject. (Rheindorf, 2004, p.17). Ironically, while sci-fi is a place of literary social revaluation, as "science fiction as a genre with an enormous potential for voicing social critique and envisioning social change" (ibid, p.18), its narratives often end with the restoration of the usual order, resolving the plot.

1.2 Men's Violence, Pain and Machines

Dune's plot revolves around the danger of religious fanaticism and its effect on violent warriors that have been trained in extreme austerity, turning them into mindless weapons. The fight scenes in *Dune* remain largely focused on male soldiers, with a specific moral code that other scholars have likened to the samurai's *bushido*, strongly underlining personal strength, control and honour (Lacroix, 2020, p.20). We however would go so far as to observe an Elizabethan-like divide between two kinds of statecraft: on the one hand, the male warrior leaders who obey a chivalric-

reminiscent order such as the Duke, Paul, Duncan Idaho or Feyd-Rautha (Allatt 2015; Viberg 2019; McLean 1982). Similarly to the *bushido* code, these men would rather die than fail in their duties and fall into dishonour, as seen with Duncan's sacrifice (p.241). On the other hand, sly politicians such as the Baron and the Emperor who do not fight, but plot and rely on other men's physical strength when violence is called upon: for example, using the concept of a champion needed for the final fight between Paul and the Emperor (p.520). *Dune's* plot revolves around political ploys and armed conflicts; and since the warrior force is overwhelmingly male, consequently almost all the men in *Dune* are defined and rely on their qualities as a warrior. The only characters that are mentioned who are not trained warriors can be counted on one hand: the Baron and the Emperor both exercise power through political schemes and champions such as Feyd-Rautha, but never by fighting themselves.

To give an idea of how much *Dune's* world relies on men's violence and performant armies, we will shortly expose a part of the plot relevant to this aspect. The Imperium's fragile equilibrium relies not only on the spice trade, but also notably on the military dominance of the Emperor. His Sardaukar army (always referred to and described as men: pp.48, 185, 199, etc.), trained with a mortality rate of more than 60% on the off-limits prison planet Salusa Secundus, is supposedly the most powerful force of the Imperium, a guarantee of superior force. The reason why the Emperor decided to be complicit in the plot against the Atreides was because their army was becoming too powerful, especially once they would have access to the Fremen on Arrakis. The Duke could have amassed manpower that would have easily beaten the Emperor's army (pp.403-406), which is exactly what his son ends up doing at the expense of unleashing a new Jihad genocide. Descriptions of the Fremen people give an idea of the extreme violence that is required to prosper in *Dune's* universe, not only for men but also women. The Fremen are a people described as "a pool of recruits already conditioned to the bitterest survival training" (p.404) because of their lifestyle of survival in the Arrakis' near-uninhabitable deserts. In the movie, it is shown that both Fremen and Sardaukar live on planets with deeply hostile climates, their living conditions hardening them into formidable survivors. This also extends to Fremen women (immediately followed by their children: "their women are as fierce as the men. Even Fremen children are violent and dangerous" p.42). Although they remain in the home, they are capable of defeating a small Sardaukar force sent to attack a sietch ("Mind you, Baron, my Sardaukar were almost overwhelmed by a force composed mostly of women, children, and old men." P.497). However, most of the fighting is done by the men ("The women throw their babies at us and hurl themselves onto our knives to open a wedge for their men to attack us." p.496). If this gender equivalence in ferocity appears as equality, it is immediately clear that Fremen women are not the warriors sent outside, except for Chani. They can fight to protect the sietch (at any price, babies included), but it is the men who attack throughout the whole story. Thus, their capacity to fight is crucial to them, formed at a very early age. Fremen

boys have a sense of warrior duty as early as nine or ten (p.375), proudly carrying knives to protect their sietch. Fremen knives, the crysknives, are surrounded by a crucial code of use: male Fremen teenagers have a duty to fabricate their own as a coming-of-age sign of virility (Lacroix, 2020, p.28). Later on this path of violence, Fremen men are shown to be eager to combat Sardaukar, seeing them as fascinating and rare worthy opponents and treating fighting to the death as a thrilling, noble activity (“‘Sardaukar!’ the Fremen said, and there appeared to be glee in his voice. ‘Ah-h-h, so that's what they are! This was a good night indeed.’” p.228). Notably, Paul’s acceptance into the tribe is decided once he defeats Jamis, proving himself superior to one of their men and stepping into his place by inheriting his water wealth, his coffee service... and his wife. In other words, Paul’s symbolic ascension to Fremen manhood (shortly after his ascension to manhood in Atreides fashion, when he slipped on his father’s ducal signet) includes the objectification of Fremen women under their patriarchal system.

Both Fremen and Sardaukar masculinities seem to revolve around their capacity for violence. The clash of these two demographics is as terrifying as it is violent, triggering the onset of Paul’s Jihad. On the side of the Sardaukar, their training and existence is described in similar terms in the Terminology of the Imperium:

SARDAUKAR: the soldier-fanatics of the Padishah Emperor. 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 a near-suicidal disregard for personal safety. They were taught from infancy to use cruelty as a standard weapon, weakening opponents with terror. [...] their cunning abilities at in-fighting were reputed to approach those of a Bene Gesserit adept. (pp.571-572).

In any description of them, Sardaukar are shown to be mindless and ruthless bloodthirsty male warriors who have no interest in politics, maybe by design as the Emperor wishes them to be simple brute force (p.249). This abusive conditioning of young boys being shaped into soldiers is coupled with a level of mechanisation to their bodies that is surprising in this machine-less age. Each Sardaukar has “a false toenail or two that can be combined with other items secreted about their bodies to make an effective transmitter”, they also “carry coils of shigawire in their hair [...] strong enough to garrotte a man and cut off his head” (p.455). With Sardaukar, it is impossible to discover every subterfuge they hold in their bodies, impossible to be certain of having dispossessed them of all their methods to kill: they are the embodiment of a weapon. This explicit mechanisation is part of the few differences between Sardaukar and Fremen: firstly, Sardaukar only employ men (thus using the promise of “beautiful women” as a motivator p.406), while Fremen society uses its women as resource producers and defenders of the sietch. Secondly, while the Fremen are shown to be exceptional engineers (their ingenuity with machines enables them to preserve water to survive), their technology is never grafted onto their bodies, rather staying external human tools,

contrary to Sardaukar implants. This makes Sardaukar, in a way, closer to machines than the Fremen who rely solely on training.

What unites these two demographics is the way their masculinities are used in their conditioning, which leads them to commit and justify any act of violence. Both are motivated by “the sustaining mystique of their warrior religion” (p.572 and explained in a mirrored discussion between Paul and his father p.48 and the Baron and Hawat p.406), an indoctrinating practice replicated by Paul with the Fremen (p.412) and highly criticized throughout the book (and even more explicitly in the movie). This conditioning is deeply specific to men: since it is called a warrior religion, it mainly targets the warrior demographic. Twenty years after the fall of the nazi state, Herbert shows how manipulating men with a violent lifestyle of religious fanaticism, the conviction that they are superior beings and the promise of what they desire most (freedom and the Green Paradise for the Fremen, riches and women for the Sardaukar) can make them capable of justifying the horrors that were inflicted to themselves and the violence they are spreading (Durrani, 2023; Erman, 2011; Howard, 2012). Twice, women are used as a manipulation tactic to facilitate this conditioning, showcasing how men are reduced to war machines while women are reduced to desirable objects: the Sardaukar are promised what they desire most (women, since they are virtually inexistant on their home planet), and Leto uses the motivating promise of possessing or protecting women as a propaganda technique for his army as well (p.88). Fremen women are also subject to this conditioning, as shown by their adherence to the code of honour, such as Chani killing Paul’s challenger (p.411) but also by their belief in the Lisan Al Gaib prophecy. However, as explained before, they do not go out on the battlefield (Gender Determinism chapter, p.21). While the Sardaukar’s warrior religion isn’t explained, a crucial dilemma in *Dune* deals with the fact that the Fremen are manipulated by the Bene Gesserit prophecy, making Paul question his adherence to it. The result of such indoctrination, along with the mass casualties, is the loss of individuality of the Fremen, especially the men. This process of succumbing to prophecy is brilliantly shown through Stilgar’s character, appearing first as a strong Fremen leader unbending to the Duke, then as Paul’s friend (pp.438-439), then as a mere follower:

Paul saw how Stilgar had been transformed from the Fremen 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. (p.507).

Describing him as a creature (in italics in the original text), a word belonging to animal vocabulary, once again illustrates the fine line in *Dune* between human and animal, and how a man’s humanity can be taken away. *Dune* shows how a people can become cannon fodder with no will of their own, motivated by great promises and becoming mindless followers. It is important to note that the men are first to be brainwashed by this mystique of religion. In the book, this process of spreading fanaticism focuses on a loss of individuality for men who become nameless soldiers,

Sardaukar or Fremen. They are useful soldiers precisely because they have no agency, acting as pure machine-like manpower, the Sardaukar even transplanting their bodies with mechanical weapons.

Men, in both movie and the book, are the first demographic to succumb to fanaticism, as well as the first to be sent to die for it. The explanation behind this targeting of men for fanaticism is not clearly stated. We know that living conditions for Sardaukar and Fremen made them particularly apt for violence, and that the Bene Gesserit prophecies and their common dream for a Green Paradise and a free Arrakis made them ripe for religious fanaticism: but both of those factors impact both Fremen men and women. The reason why men are indoctrinated first is not explicitly given in the book, but it is demonstrated when Paul justifies Chani's absence from the battlefield (p.457): it is because war has traditionally been a male endeavour, sending able-bodied men to fight first and sustaining dominating masculine conceptions of war and peace (Heathcote et al., 2021; Young, 2003). If some Fremen women are good fighters, their place in Fremen society during war remains inside the sietch, in which an internal gender hierarchy remains for matters of combat. For example, young men are the demographic that Paul keeps trying to appease when they call for blood (p.313, 431, 457) while Fremen women are not as proactive in their war sentiment. Thus, what sets them aside are traditional gender roles, if one calls war efforts gender roles. The determinist logic is in there too, as seen with how young Fremen boys especially are pushed into violence very early. *Dune's* criticism of the indoctrination of the Fremen during wartime offers a "scathing critique of religion as a system; yet it simultaneously provides insight into the powerful and transformative power that religion offers" (Schwartz, 2014, p.534), a bloody freedom that enslaves for the purpose of war rather than liberates. This treatment of men's bodies illustrates the dehumanisation needed in the process of war—a timeless analogy in human conflicts (Greenberg, 2021).

This dehumanisation has also been pointed out in another of its forms: in Carrie Lynn Evans' reading of *Dune*, the depiction of women isn't only based on misogynistic fears of the female other, as we have shown with the abject, but also "strongly influenced by a fear of technology that is projected onto women" (Evans, 2016, p.3). Her reading points out important parallels between cyborgs and the women in *Dune*, but she does not extend this analysis to men. We will not dig into female mechanisation because it has already been done thoroughly in Evans' work. However, further perspective on the analysis of *Dune's* mechanisation for male characters will add something new to the discussion on *Dune's* gender discourse, notably by establishing links between masculinity, pain and war propaganda. Thus, this chapter on men's violence would not be complete if it did not analyse this facet of the description of men's bodies in *Dune*, and what their mechanisation entails for its portrayal of gender.

Dune's rejection of the nonhuman plays with the fear of machines that slowly arose during Herbert's lifespan, deeply impacting sci-fi works during that epoch of rapid technological advancements. In his story, one of the most important recurring oppositions is the triad of the animal/human/machine. A few 10,000 years before Paul Atreides's birth, the Butlerian Jihad led humanity to annihilate all thinking machines, their own creations going rogue and starting to enslave their makers. This event forced humans to search for new ways of evolution without including technology, rather turning to biology and training to guide human evolution. As such, the main characters in *Dune* are all extremely advanced humans with rare genetical traits and rigorous training to make up for the lack of machinery.

Dune's humanity is terrified of thinking machines but is also obsessed with controlling their own evolution; this is shown with the Gom Jabbar test, usually used to test Bene Gesserit members. Paul is one of the rare men who got tested: at the very start of the book, the Reverend Mother explains that the Gom Jabbar is designed to make sure he fits the standards of the new, improved human rather than following his instincts when facing extreme pain as an animal would (pp. 8-11). This does not mean that *Dune's* average person is not human; rather, the Bene Gesserit have narrowed the definition of humanity for their own purposes and that is what they are testing for. This emphasis on pain response to determine one's humanity echoes with the prevalent masculine stereotype that a man should be able to withstand pain quietly, since "the expression of pain could challenge masculine identity, and so pain can have a demasculinising effect" (Keogh, 2015, p.7). Studies focusing on evaluating the relationship between gender stereotypes and pain responses found that "individuals who considered themselves more masculine and less sensitive to pain than the typical man showed higher pain thresholds and tolerances" (Alabas et al., 2012, p.1; Schwarz et al., 2019). Their findings uncover the fact that pain tolerance stereotypes influence the individual's pain threshold, not the other way around. Moreover, those studies confirmed that men who ascribe relevance to those gender stereotypes will find showing signs of pain weak. *Dune* uses this pain stereotype to emphasise the masculinity of characters who suffer, but ultimately the link between masculine strength and pain threshold is not as scientific as one might think; rather, it is a sociological gender norm. In the Gom Jabbar scene, a fifteen-year-old Paul has to master himself not to pull away from the pain to prove his humanity to the witch-like figure of the Reverend Mother—his humanity, but also his potential as the Kwisatz Haderach, the superior mind that the Bene Gesserit were waiting for. Paul's ignorance of what is happening, and the Reverend Mother's offhand treatment of Jessica and her son makes the reader empathise with the hero. Paul emerges victorious of this test, and it is later written that "he surmounted more agony in the test than any other human of record" (p.552, Appendix III), which would make him more closely resemble a machine that does not feel rather than a human. Indeed, an inability to feel pain might join with

an inability to feel altogether: recall the point made about Paul's inability to feel his emotions, questioning his humanity (as seen with Hegemonic Masculinities p.35).

Paul has this recurring motif of surmounting pain thanks to his training and genetics, sometimes helped by the Litany against Fear, a psychological mantra. In the movie, Jessica is the one to regulate herself with the Litany, while Paul is forced to stay silent, enduring the pain (mirrored at the moment of his victory, when he uses the Voice to scream 'Silence!' to the Reverend Mother who once silenced him 2:26:20, *Part Two*). As we have shown previously with the Water of Life ritual, Jessica's portrayal in the movie is far less composed than how she appears in the book, which contrasts even more with Paul's apparent control of himself, his mastery over his pain and emotions. This difference in emotional and pain portrayal emphasises Paul's ascent to manhood and the many tests that he must undertake to grow and survive. It also puts emphasis on how Jessica's feminine loss of control clashes with Paul's superior, masculine control over his pain, facilitating a stereotypical gendered hierarchy where men are rational being in control, and women are not. Moreover, Paul as well as the Sardaukar and the Fremen all show how masculinities in *Dune* are accompanied by an obligation of violence and control of one's pain responses and emotions, facilitating their mechanisation rather than making them more human.

Chapter Four: Division of Labour: Everything in its Right Place

As uncovered throughout this analysis thus far, *Dune* systematically showcases a clear division of labour between men and women, no matter the civilisation. In the previous chapter, we have shown how *Dune*'s masculinities revolve around violence and how men are recruited into war. In this chapter, we will expose and make explicit this division of labour and showcase how these aspects of *Dune*'s societies are linked to real-life patriarchal conceptions of the public sphere. To do so, the analysis will touch Fremen societies, but also Harkonnen and Atreides conceptions of the home and the family sphere, including the education of the young. We will expose how different the gendered educations of *Dune*'s cultures are and how they exacerbate stereotypical roles and hierarchies through a comparison between the girl's education and the education of the male heirs. A nuanced point will also be made concerning the movie with Chani's revamped character which constitutes an important exception to this gender division, in comparison to the book.

1.1 Gender Roles Differences and Education of the Daughters and Heirs

Gender inequalities begin at the youngest age, influenced and controlled by education. The education of girls and boys is different, because in *Dune*'s society girls are just girls, but sons are heirs. In this chapter, we will analyse how each of *Dune*'s cultures deal with their private spheres: how the family unit functions, who the caretakers are and how they educate their youth, but also how this education varies between boys and girls, as their culture expects different things from them. This gendered upbringing is all the more apparent when the education of the boys is taken into account. We use this analysis to contrast both educations, focalising on their gendered aspects and showcasing how this impacts their occupations as adults, enforcing stereotypical gender roles.

In most Great Houses, a Bene Gesserit woman is bought to be a Truthsayer and a concubine. It is unclear if they raise the children themselves, but they retain access to their children, and that is how the Bene Gesserit order exercises its power. For example, Lady Fenring refers to "bearing a child" (p.364) and plans to take the child away from the Harkonnens. We also know that Jessica, who was born as the Baron's daughter, was also recruited by the Bene Gesserit before she could realize her heritage. Both children we see being educated, Paul and Feyd-Rautha, are boys who are being trained in the ways of physical combat by other men—although a good part of Paul's teaching scenes also concern politics and economic planning. Women in the Great Houses are shown to have different tasks. Jessica runs the household: she decorates and assigns the rooms (p.55), organises evening parties where political games become paramount (p.138), and she is also shown to oversee choosing the establishment's servants, whom are all women (pp.52-54). During a party dinner, guests compliment Jessica on her chef and the wine (p.145), implicitly relegating such work to the Lady of the House rather than the Duke or the cooks. Moreover, Kynes apologises to her when bringing uncouth subjects up around the table (p.148), subscribing to the motif of Victorian

women's sensibilities—not hurting a pure and innocent Ladie's 'sensibilities' and apologising when any slightly darker subject or colourful language is brought up in front of her. (Debretts, *Victorian Etiquette for Ladies* 2022; Johnson, 1989). While this appears ludicrous in the story since Jessica is a trained fighter, the evocation of this type of politeness calls back to the very traditional and misogynistic undertones of that specific scene.

To elaborate on the misogyny of the dinner chapter, the analysis needs to turn towards the other women present, those external from the Atreides society. On Arrakis, the women of the wealthy caste present to the dinner are described to be “cast from a specific type--decorative, precisely turned out, an odd mingling of untouchable sensuousness” (p.138). Throughout the chapter (pp.138-157), any woman described is said to be there to seduce; one comes from an escort service designed to spy and blackmail, and the younger ladies try to flock around Paul and compete for his attention. They are depicted as fake, trying too hard to please (so much so that one is shushed p.139). They are referred to as “consort women”, handing out low-voiced “coquetries” (p.141). One of them, the stillsuit manufacturer's companion, is described as “tiny and doll-faced” which reinforces her submissive status (p.151). Notably, she looks to her companion before answering when spoken to, as if totally dependent on his approval. Her companion only permits her to eat once she has successfully extracted information out of Jessica (p.155). Overall, none of the women who are present are acting out of their own desires, but are all bound to another man's goals, acting very submissively. Everything they are saying is some sort of planned signal, and they were instructed beforehand on how to lead the conversation a certain way (p.155). When Jessica observes the stillsuit manufacturer's daughter, her conclusions further support the misogynistic aspect of the dinner dynamic:

Jessica saw the near perfection of the girl's act, realized: That empty-headed little female is not an empty-headed little female. She saw then the pattern of the threat and understood that Halleck, too, had detected it. They had planned to lure Paul with sex. (pp. 154-155).

In the elite of Arrakis, women are thus subservient to their partner, and their function seem to be restricted to the so-called “decorative, sensuous type” (p.138). They are there to direct the conversation, further their partner's agenda, and pose as a sexual object. While they all thus contribute to the political intrigue, they do so in the same way that is reserved to them, using their sex appeal. This is also reinforced by Jessica's later reflexions on Chani, noting the “feminine allure” in her voice and saying that she “must caution Paul about their [Fremen] women” (p.344), treating Chani as a temptress that threatens Paul's political desirability and future political alliances. Even though Jessica eventually accepts Chani, this dynamic recalls the fetishisation and dehumanisation of female characters that we invoked earlier (p.40). In terms of gender roles, it remains very strongly traditional: the only servant we see is a woman, while all elite women are scheming sexual objects or evil crones.

Outside of the Atreides's walls, Fremen women are shown to be a crucial part of the normal workforce in the sietches—Fremen women make weapons, forecast the weather, collect spice, make dunes, fabrics, and train the children (p.417). But even as active members of society, they are pretty much confined inside the sietch, their equivalent of the private family sphere, as no native female Fremen other than Chani and the Shadout Mapes are shown to venture out. The Fremen family sphere is also an unconventional one by “our” Western standards (which are also the standards of the Atreides). A Fremen man can get several wives, depending on how many men he has triumphed over. Stilgar explains that Fremen women are not taken against their will (p.312); rather, the victor is being made socially responsible for them. The man has the obligation of deciding whether to keep the woman as a wife or a servant for a year, or free her immediately. However, freedom for a Fremen woman does not seem enviable: Harah begs Paul to keep her as a wife, insisting that she is still young and enquiring that he will not “cast [her] out when the year's gone” (p.369) since the living quarters are the property of the man. Their children are merged in the same family, although a sietch collects all families together nonetheless: “The Fremen typically lived in patriarchal collectives, known as sietches, which were led by a Naib. [...] Polygamy was commonplace in Fremen society, with more prominent men having several wives and children with each of them.”¹² Fremen society is thus explicitly patriarchal; the only position of power available to the women is through religion, as a Sayyadina¹³ or a Reverend Mother. Fremen women can fight, and they are important contributors of society through their work in the sietch, but overall, their contributions in the book come to the expense of sequestration inside the private sphere.

This fundamental schism in gender roles, present in Fremen society but also in all the other cultures, begins during childhood, with how the children are taught. The education of the female children in the Great Houses is not shown in this book. The only insight we have is Irulan's, one of the Emperor's daughters. Her part in the narrative comes through the small incipits that begin each chapter—words taken from official books, written after the end of the story. In these, Irulan explains that her mother, a Bene Gesserit, has taught her to sense her father's mood. She describes how her father talked to her: for example, that he wished she had been older so that she could be married to the Duke Leto while Irulan was 14 at the time (p.114). In another excerpt, she explains:

Family life of the Royal Creche is difficult for many people to understand, but I shall try to give you a capsule view of it. [...] The Count, a dapper and ugly little man, brought a new

¹² Taken from the Fremen entry in the Dune Wiki.

¹³ “The term Sayyadina (meaning "friend of God" in Chakobsa) was used by the Fremen to describe their lower-ranking priestesses who had not yet changed the Water of Life and become Reverend Mothers. Often, a woman would be consecrated as Sayyadina at the same time that the previous Sayyadina attempted the spice agony, so that all would not be lost if the potential Reverend Mother failed and died.” (Dune Wiki).

slave-concubine to my father one day and I was dispatched by my mother to spy on the proceedings. All of us spied on my father as a matter of self-protection. One of the slave-concubines permitted my father under the Bene Gesserit-Guild agreement could not, of course, bear a Royal Successor, but the intrigues were constant and oppressive in their similarity. We became adept, my mother and sisters and I, at avoiding subtle instruments of death. It may seem a dreadful thing to say, but I'm not at all sure my father was innocent in all these attempts. A Royal Family is not like other families. Here was a new slave-concubine, then, red-haired like my father, willowy and graceful. She had a dancer's muscles, and her training obviously had included neuro-enticement. My father looked at her for a long time as she postured unclothed before him. Finally he said: "She is too beautiful. We will save her as a gift. " You have no idea how much consternation this restraint created in the Royal Creche. Subtlety and self-control were, after all, the most deadly threats to us all.

-*"In My Father's House"* by the Princess Irulan (p.280).

Life as an Imperial daughter is not comfortable or self-interested as the boy's education is in the Great Houses. Despite their social status being superior as members of the Royal Family, those girl's lives are arguably worse. Irulan explains that young girls of the Imperial Court, those who are part of the Royal family, often spy on their father as a means of self-protection. Constant attempts were made on their lives, despite them not being Royal Successors by virtue of their sex. More surprisingly, the Emperor himself may have played a part in those assassination attempts—the reason remains obscure, but nonetheless it is clear that behaviour and education for the girls in the Royal Creche is violent and stressful, the "intrigues constant and oppressive in their similarity". Having the Emperor's daughters spy on him as he picks out slave-concubines appears grotesque, but Irulan justifies it as being an important task for their survival. By monitoring his behaviour and choices, his daughters could gauge his mood, attempt to guess at his next political ploy that might impact them. If the Emperor demonstrates "subtlety and self-control", it signifies that he could escape scrutiny and break out of the expectations. Irulan's insight clashes with Paul's, whose assassination attempt spreads chaos and fury in the whole Atreides household; Irulan and her sisters survive so many of them that nobody mentions it. While their education isn't recounted, we know that Irulan was trained as a Bene Gesserit. This training includes many disciplines for self-control and bodily mastery, but not the Voice, and it is unknown if she is trained in the martial arts. Both the Voice, Truthsay and fighting abilities seem reserved for a select few; the Reverend Mothers, Jessica, and by extension Paul. Following the Bene Gesserit Plan alienates Irulan from her father, whose wishes for a son cannot be fulfilled by their order. Resentment, secrets and murder are important parts of her life; keeping tabs on her father and adapting to his actions constitute one of the most important activities she does.

In contrast, the male heirs receive an education that is much different from the women of the Great Houses. On Caladan, the lifestyle is easy, and the land prospers securely. There are resources and water aplenty, and no external threat to its dukedom. When the story starts, Paul is fifteen. Both his father and his mother take on a teaching role towards him: his father for political matters,

his mother for Bene Gesserit techniques such as Voice control and Truthsense. His trust and subservience to his mother are notable as she teaches him those techniques, denying her Bene Gesserit obligations of secrecy out of love for her son, wanting to see him succeed. As the ducal heir, Paul spends his time training with his various mentors, such as Gurney, Idaho, Thufir Hawat and Yueh, with whom he maintains a close friendship. His training with them is harsh and they are sparse with their praises, but these male teachers are shown in a nurturing role. Paul is even described having healthy physical touch with Hawat and Idaho, hugging them when he is glad to see them again. Although Paul feels very alone, with “no playmates his own age” as “the dangers were too great” (p.30), he harbours a loving relationship with both his parents and his “companion-teachers” (Ibid). The Duke invites him to witness his strategy conference (p.56), as a way for him to observe and learn, and encourages him to intervene if he wishes to offer his own arguments (pp.90-104). Paul has responsibilities as a ducal heir, including political appearances (p.139: “You have a place--a position to uphold. You're old enough to do this. You're almost a man.”). His father’s men treat him with respect and kindness; the latter is quite rare in *Dune*. For example, Leto once returns to a conference room only to “find it dark and Paul asleep on the table with a guard's robe thrown over him and a ditty pack for a pillow” (p.109). The Atreides education is to the image of its planet: gentle, rigorous and nurturing.

As soon as the second chapter commences, Harkonnen culture stands out as totally at odds with the Atreides. Giedi Prime is a planet that adorns an “illusion of gaiety” (p.345), fresh paint trying to make up for the “rubbish heaps, the scabrous brown walls reflected in the dark puddles of the street” (ibid.). All of the Baron’s entourage is “carefully subservient” (p.17) to him but does not seem to respect him or even love him at all. His Mentat, Pieter, and his own heir Feyd Rautha act as to please the Baron, but their inside thoughts betray their disdain for the monstrous Baron. Pieter, described as a “slender, short man with an effeminate face” (p.14) is the only one sly enough to dare playfully criticise his ruler, and consequently the Baron frequently sends death threats his way, thinking of disposing of his Mentat soon as he “outlived his usefulness” (p.16). What is notable about the Harkonnen family is that there is not a single woman to be seen. The Baron is Feyd Rautha and Rabban’s uncle, but their mothers are unknown. Instead of being in a traditional, loving nucleus of father-mother-child like the Atreides, the Harkonnens stands at opposites compared to Paul’s family. The education there is not given in a caring manner; instead, the Baron teaches his nephew through bargaining with the promise of power, or violently testing him—for example, with his birthday’s ceremony (p.345), or when he forces him to kill his slaves as punishment (pp. 397-401).

What unites the education of both boys is that they subscribe to *Dune*'s martial laws of honour. Kanly¹⁴, first named by the Duke Leto (p.16), is the equivalent of a vendetta with specific rules and ancient verbal components that must be respected. Both Paul and Feyd Rautha abide by it religiously, highly driven by honour and martial merit. They are both trained, educated and motivated to settle their family's ancient dispute:

"Kanly!" Feyd-Rautha shouted. He pressed against the barrier lance. "Your father named this vendetta, Atreides. You call me coward while you hide among your women and offer to send a lackey against me! [...]" "That woman you were talking to over there," Feyd-Rautha said. "The little one. Is she something special to you? A pet perhaps? Will she deserve my special attentions?" (pp.518-524).

Appealing to Paul's seemingly unwillingness to fight, insulting him by accusing him of hiding among his women and using Chani against him is Feyd Rautha's attempt to goad him into fighting. Kanly functions as a declaration of war between two families, seemingly passed on onto the male heirs, making it a masculine feud system (Irulan never evokes kanly, despite Paul killing her father). Moreover, there is a link between the martial respect of the codes of honour, what they call "bravura", and Paul's grandfather, the Old Duke whose masculinity was evoked earlier (p.23), also called the "bravura father" (p.353, p.7) killed by a bull. It is said that a strong leader must "cultivate an air of bravura" (p.112) in a sort of indoctrination that Paul later weaponises to win the Fremen over (p.412); Feyd Rautha's decision to demonstrate "true bravura" (p.363) in the Harkonnen arena is a political choice, but also a conscious decision to adhere to the martial code of honour, which Harkonnen custom does not abide by. Furthermore, when Paul accepts to fight, he refuses to use the word-sound that Feyd Rautha is conditioned with that would assure him a safe victory (p.520). Nobody in his entourage understands why he takes such a risk, not even Jessica or Gurney. Kanly and honour, both concepts deeply embedded into the specific masculine code of the Great Houses, seem to supersede any other concern for both boys.

Through this analysis of the male heir's education, we can see the differences with the previous portrait of the women in court and see how *Dune*'s cultures have a gendered education. While women's lives essentially revolve around other powerful men: the Emperor for Irulan, the Duke and Paul for Jessica, or the husbands in the Fremen family sphere. Harkonnen women are entirely invisible, Arrakeen women are "decorative" (p.138), and the education of the daughters is seldom portrayed.

14 "KANLY: formal feud or vendetta under the rules of the Great Convention carried on according to the strictest limitations. (Terminology of the Imperium, p.565). "The act of kanly was originally created as a way of allowing bitter disputes to be resolved without any harm being brought upon innocent bystanders [...]" Kanly (kanlı) is a Turkish word meaning somebody who is involved in a blood feud (bloody, from the stem kan, blood). This animosity continued from father to son, until the last child was dead or the two families made peace." (Dune Wiki).

1.2 Movie Adaptation: Chani, the Nonbeliever

As we have seen in the previous chapters, *Dune*'s first book is a story of battles, and those battles are a male affair. As such, in *Dune* Fremen men are depicted suffering the price of war and depriving themselves of half their effectives, although their women are capable of fighting. We have previously shown how traditional gender roles and war propaganda were to blame for this (see *Men's Violence* p.48). As such, Fremen women are rather shown following along Muad'Dib and their men's will, sustaining economical war efforts from behind with industry and childrearing. This is, no doubt, entirely inspired on women's roles in the two World Wars: in WWII America, the percentage of women in the workforce jumped by 50 percent (Rose, 2018). Outside and during war, Fremen women are relegated to the sietch, not the battle grounds (p.417). Even Chani, a trained woman, stays at the sietch, swallowing her protests at Paul's request: "I am stronger when you are safe. You will remain in the sietch." (p.457). In the book, Fremen women do not oppose any scepticism to the faith and the social order. In fact, Jessica explains in the movie that she shall start to convert the nonbelievers "with the weaker ones, the vulnerable ones, the ones who fear us" (*Part Two*, 00:34:10, the camera panning on a woman and children), picturing them as the starting point of the religious conditioning, while female characters ironically make up most of the resistance against the brainwashing faith. In the book, this conditioning targets mainly the men with the warrior religion evoked earlier (p.51), while Fremen women are instrumental to motivate the troops and fuel the war economy.

The movie adds to this by picturing important opposing forces to the faith such as Chani, a far more progressive figure who fights for her people, not for faith, and whose voice does not waver. Although there is a similar process of war conditioning shown through Stilgar character's descent into religious devotion, all Fremen do not think like a monolith and some even actively criticize him, like Chani, but also two new characters, Shishakli and the Elder Council Woman (00:16:00, *Part Two*). This is a surprising change from Chani and Harah in the book, both convinced religious characters who are very submissive towards Paul: in the movies, Chani and Shishakli oppose a united scepticism to the religious question, as well as being two excellent fighters. Though Jessica still reduces women and children to the "weaker ones" in the movie, it seems that some higher-up women do not fall for this mysticism, even though their voices are ultimately overpowered by war and fanaticism. The addition of those two new female characters shows that there is an effort to offer some variance in Fremen belief and in gender equality. The movie also makes change to this previously male-exclusive war effort. Villeneuve explains, in an interview:

"In the book, Chani is a believer. In this adaptation, Chani is part of a group of Fremen that don't believe in this idea of a messianic figure. I did that for the audience to feel that the Fremen are in a society that is more complex, that everybody does not believe in the Bene Gesserit idea. This contrast gave me the possibility to have some perspective on Paul at the end." (Evry, 2024).

In another interview, co-writer Jon Spaihts echoed that he and Villeneuve wanted to expand female roles such as Chani's, but also to add more female characters, "because there are ways in which *Dune* was very progressive for its time — but its time was the '60s." (Salisbury, 2022). Scholarly reflexions on the first movie point out that Chani appears as "much more romanticized and exoticized vision of a silent Chani when compared to the book" (Kennedy, 2024). While true for *Part One*, *Part Two* changes Chani's character. Instead of appearing only in dreams, or being a Sayyadina and having a religious rank among the Fremen, she is a nonbeliever fighter. This change is meaningful; although she loses her religious authority, as seen when she is silenced at the meeting of leaders (*Part Two*, 02:01:20), she becomes a self-led person with her own set of values and limits. She acts not only as a romantic interest and messianic figure to accompany Paul, but rather as an equal (*Part Two*, 00:46:00 "We are equal, men and women alike" [...] "I'd very much like to be equal to you"). She even appears as his better by the end, when Paul betrays her by choosing the path of the Jihad, marrying Irulan (*Part Two*, 2:36:45). Chani is seen angrily but decidedly leaving, remaining true to herself and her people, riding into the desert as the last scene of the movie closes. A far cry from the book's concluding lines regarding her status as concubine:

"Think on it, Chani: that princess will have the name, yet she'll live as less than a concubine -- never to know a moment of tenderness from the man to whom she's bound. While we, Chani, we who carry the name of concubine -- history will call us wives." (p.529).

Instead of dreaming of being remembered as a wife rather than a concubine, in the movie Chani is a warrior who dreams of seeing Fremen people liberated of oppression, including the religious oppression of Paul. Just as *Dune: Part One* opened with Chani's voice asking who her planet's next oppressor will be as the camera next shows Paul (*Part One*, 00:03:00-00:03:17), in *Part Two* her character stays true and independent to the end. This modernised depiction of Chani opens our eyes to the original book's lack of consideration and nuance for the other gender.

Similarly, Irulan's character, already ambiguously depicted defying gender roles in the book, changes in *Part Two*. In the last point on the education of the daughters, we saw that the representation of women's roles remains androcentric; but there is one redeeming quality conferred to Irulan that shows some of her skills outside of the more typical female labour in *Dune*. The presence of the excerpts written by her, such as the ones we analysed earlier, implicitly shows that she was an important scholar. She wrote "Manual of Muad'Dib" (p.3 and 105), "Muad'Dib: family commentaries" (p.83), "Collected Sayings of Muad'Dib" (p.110, 136) ... all of which concern Paul, written after the book ends. She has also written "In My Father's House" (p.114, 280), and "Count Fenring: A Profile" (p.393), which concern life at the Creche, the Emperor and his entourage. Even so, all her works concern the men in her life, and we get very little of her own mind; seeing how official her books are, we are even tempted to approach her writings with a critical distance reserved for propaganda documents. Still, the presence of these excerpts shows that the Emperor's daughter

is not only a Bene Gesserit, but also a scholar. Similarly, in the movies her character is presented in a more active light. She is depicted as an intelligent, educated woman: the Emperor himself asks for her council and says she would be a formidable Empress (*Part Two*, 1:08:50-1:09:50), sometimes even acting as a moral compass in the face of the Bene Gesserit's machinations (*Part Two*, 00:01:40 and 02:07:00). This makes her another female character whose role changes in the adaptation, becoming free thinkers rather than simple followers.

Part Two: Political Landscape and Gender Dystopias

The politics of *Dune* are one of its central points, and an understanding of them is needed to fully grasp the messages of its story. This chapter will discuss who holds power in *Dune*, to which end it is used, and what that represents for our gender analysis. More precisely, the Bene Gesserit, who have merged religion and politics, add a gendered dimension to *Dune*'s politics. Their embodiment of religious archetypes (witches and priestesses) indicates their deep understanding of patriarchal societies, in which they use and reinforce gendered weapons and perceptions to exert power, repressing and moulding society to their will. The interaction of these themes paints a dystopian system of power, illustrating how politics, religion, and gender can reinforce hierarchical control over humankind. Our analysis will plunge deeper into this order.

Chapter One: Hierarchy of the Landsraad

1.1 Gendered Hierarchy, an Historical overview: The Guild and The Bene Gesserit

Dune's political system is realistically quite complex, and not a lot of information is given about it in the first book. Rather, the reader is invited to live in it, to experience the impacts of such a system without fully knowing what the causes ruling its political forces are. At the beginning of the story, the Reverend Mother, whose obscure role in Paul's test and authority over Jessica positions as an educational figure, gives an important lesson on the history of *Dune*'s universe:

"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." [...] "The Great Revolt took away a crutch," she said. "It forced human minds to develop. Schools were started to train human talents. "

"Bene Gesserit schools?"

She nodded. "We have two chief survivors of those ancient schools: the Bene Gesserit and the Spacing Guild. The Guild, so we think, emphasizes almost pure mathematics. Bene Gesserit performs another function."

"Politics," he said. (pp.12-13).

To give an idea of the long history that has led the *Dune* universe to what it is in the book, it is useful to note that between the Great Revolt (also called the Butlerian Jihad or War on Machines) and Paul's present, around ten thousand years have passed. During all that time, the Butlerian Jihad forced humanity to rebuild itself following new rules for its survival: the prohibition of intelligent machines, but also the investment into innate human potential instead of external tools. The end of this war marked the creation of several prominent political and economic bodies, which are inherently divided by gender.

Firstly, the older Bene Gesserit schools, which later split into the all-female Bene Gesserit order focused on "genetic experimentation, galactic political interference, and religious engineering

to further their own agenda of ascending the human race” (Dune Wiki). They generally deny being a religious order, but through the Missionaria Protectiva’s mysticism¹⁵, they spread prophecies and conceal themselves in ritual secrecy. They primarily train their biological capabilities, with total mental and bodily control, the Voice and Truthsense. The latter skill was used as a tool for political manipulation: each prominent elite family buys a Truthsayer, which gives them political relevance as they cannot be lied to. Not owning a Truthsayer is unusual, which was remarked by Feyd-Rautha concerning the Baron’s refusal to do so (“Why haven't you ever bought a Bene Gesserit, Uncle?” p.397). The words used, again, are not innocuous: saying they can ‘buy’ a Truthsayer or a concubine means something different than employing or recruiting a Truthsayer or a concubine. The monetary implication of the word implies a commodification of those women, which is in fact desired by the Bene Gesserit. Similarly to nuclear weapons, having one is a powerful insurance, not having one is huge risk, and nobody would rather focus on the risks that come with its hegemony. Bene Gesserit and their Truthsayers effectively made themselves indispensable, despite their well-known and feared hidden motives. Interestingly, during the above-mentioned scene where the Reverend Mother explains the Bene Gesserit Plan, Paul repeatedly signals that he felt his ‘instinct for rightness’ was offended by their *modus operandi* (“Paul felt the offense against rightness. He said: ‘You take a lot on yourselves.’ The Reverend Mother stared at him, wondering: Did I hear criticism in his voice?” p.13). Their willingness to keep their member’s parentage in the dark, to inbreed them, to discard some humans as ‘animal stock’ and to sacrifice men like Paul’s father is indeed criticisable, as is their objectification and trafficking of women.

From the other original Bene Gesserit schools emerged the Spacing Guild, a STEM-oriented order relying on pure mathematical capacities to calculate, plan and monopolise interplanetary travel and Imperial banking. The importance of the Guild cannot be overstated, as shown by the fact that its date of monopoly establishment literally acts as the second coming of Christ (Before Christ/Anno Domini and Before Guild/After Guild¹⁶), defining the starting date of the year count. By seizing and organising spice production and banking, the Guild had enough leverage to force peace upon the Imperium, imposing new rules on war like the Great Convention or *kanly*. The few actors of the Guild we hear about are called Guildsmen (pp.49, 494, 502); similarly to the

¹⁵ “The Missionaria Protectiva was the Bene Gesserit Sisterhood's "black arm of superstition" [...] This "religious engineering" spread "infectious superstitions on primitive worlds, thus opening those regions to exploitation by the Bene Gesserit." [...] These myths also exploit religion as a powerful force in human society; by controlling the particulars of religion, the Bene Gesserit have a manipulative lever on society in general. The Bene Gesserit also employ the Missionaria Protectiva to prepare the Empire for the arrival of the Kwisatz Haderach.” (Dune Wiki).

¹⁶ “The Universal Standard Calendar, also known as the Imperial Calendar, is the standard measurement of time in the known universe. It centered around the founding of the Spacing Guild, which established a monopoly on all space travel, transport, and Imperial banking throughout the known universe, as the starting year. BG stands for *Before Guild*, and AG stands for *After Guild*.” (Dune Wiki).

Sardaukar army, the Guild is not explicitly said to be male-only, but it is portrayed so nonetheless. Their organisation is also quite secretive (p.49), but it is known that they consume gargantuan amounts of spice to fuel their mental capabilities for the universe's space travel needs, which makes them heavily reliant on spice stocks (controlled by CHOAM¹⁷). This gendered schism between Bene Gesserit politics and Guild mathematics is crucial to *Dune*'s worldbuilding and is thus explicitly and historically explained early in the story (p.13). It is actualised in the text by portraying all Bene Gesserit members only as women (Jessica, Irulan, the Reverend Mother, Lady Fenring...) and referring to all the Guild members as "guildsmen" (p.49, 502, 514 and 521) while also portraying their navigators as men (p.482). This gendered divide also echoes *Dune*'s gender essentialism, which tends to "creat[e] a conception in society of a cultural division of labour whereby masculine nature is linked to reason and juxtaposed to feminine nature which is linked to emotions. Men and women are seen as different; with men associated with rationality which is also seen as the standard for all that is human, while women are associated with the body and emotions." (Manicom, 2015, pp.7-8). Indeed, the Humanities of the Bene Gesserit stresses politics (p.13), bodily control (p. 267 with prana-bindu), linguistics (the Voice and its inflexions), biology (eugenics) and psychology (such as emotional manipulation and soothsay p.517), while the Guild concerns itself only with predicting space navigation with mathematics. However, despite conservating this divide, *Dune* shows that in this new age, the Bene Gesserit have the upper hand with political sciences while the Guild's influence is limited to where CHOAM and Imperial interests begin. However, nothing is said about wages, and admittedly being a Bene Gesserit requires many more sacrifices than a Guildsman, as they must obey to whatever is asked of them, sacrificing their personal lives and their bodies for their order's goals.

This schism is akin to the real-world divide between male-dominated STEM fields and the diverse fields of the Humanities or social sciences (Psychology, Political Science, Linguistics, Education, etc.)¹⁸. In contemporary debates this distinction is both questioned and exacerbated: with its newest AI boom, the tech race leaves other facets of the economy in the dust (Thomas et al., 2024; Romei, 2024). Money and prestige flow toward STEM, while other fields are heavily devaluated, which feminist studies have pointed out as inherently linked to gender as well. Indeed, this economic distinction is relevant to gender in the sense that it has real, financial consequences. It acts as a vicious cycle: women being kept out of STEM means keeping them out of the highest-

¹⁷ "Combine Honnete Ober Advancer Mercantiles (CHOAM), a major galactic organisation whose monopoly encompasses all forms of commerce across the Imperium. It which essentially controls all economic affairs across the cosmos, although it relied upon the Spacing Guild for transport." (Dune Wiki).

¹⁸ In UGent for the academic year 2024-2025, overall ~56.22% of bachelor students were female: the faculty of engineering and architecture held 2733 students. Based on this number, one would expect ~1537 female students; yet in reality the faculty hosts 582 female students. The faculty of arts & philosophy has a smaller gap in disfavour of male students (2383 students: 1504 female - 879 male).

paying jobs, forcing them back from more financial freedom and closer to household occupations rather than a high-stake career. As this tendency lost some of its momentum, and more women entered previously male-dominated workforces, many realised that the issue ran deeper. Adding to the average gender wage disparity (which is already, in itself, a multi-factor issue), studies showed evidence of social value decline in certain fields when more women worked in them, also called occupational devaluation. Social devaluation is connected to wage decline: thus, the vicious circle continues. (Moser, 2024; Magnusson, 2008). In *Dune*, this tendency has been pushed to an extreme. Before Paul's time, technological advancements got out of hand while humans became helpless to resist their enslavement by the machine's masters, which showed a dystopic outcome of this STEM field-related domination. After Paul's time, we can still see how the political and social sciences of the Bene Gesserit remain associated with women, widely distrusted and hated, while the male-exclusive Spacing Guild that relies on "pure mathematics" singlehandedly carries the space trade. Both operate in different economies: the Space Trade is its own megacorporation that lets its men live in privacy and generates copious amounts of money (p.49 and p.254), while the Bene Gesserit Sisterhood sends out its members by selling them (see p.64), an important difference in semantics when dealing with those two factions. Moreover, with this occupational gendered divide we see that women are still first in line to perform traditional labour such as household tasks or childrearing (see Division of Labour p.54), a possible consequence of being financially dependent on the patriarch and being mainly connected to the body, emotions and traditionally "soft" sciences. Even the most powerful members of the Bene Gesserit operate within the same framework, gaining political power but reinforcing gender roles.

Chapter Two: *Dune's* Patriarchy and Bene Gesserit Complicity

Past social organisations such as the Guild or the Bene Gesserit, feminist scholars have largely pointed out the fact that the political system in place also has a large impact on gender roles and structures of domination (Millett, 1970). In *Dune*, a newly hegemonic political system rose to prominence after the Butlerian Jihad: the Landsraad. After House Corrino was established as holders of the throne after one of the last battles against machines, they maintained their empire by striking deals with the Spacing Guild, CHOAM, and by devising the political system of the Landsraad. This system installed the new Faufreluches class system. Based on feudal Europe, specifically the Holy Roman Empire¹⁹, this system uses patriarchal primogeniture and elective monarchy; the Emperor's son isn't automatically the next ruler, as the throne can be usurped by the most powerful Great House's male heir, if he found a way to defeat the imperial Sardaukar army. Both Feyd-Rautha and Paul attempted such a coup. This system enforces a political environment where male violence is paramount (as we have seen in the chapter on Men's Violence p.47) and where the education of the heirs grooms them for this purpose (chapter on Gender Roles and Education p.54). Such a system also impacts women's lives as they are unable to gain power outside of rigid roles acceptable for their sex, such as religious or maternal roles (Kennedy, 2021). Even so, all the most powerful female characters who fit this description —the Reverend Mother, Jessica, Irulan and Chani—are still actually powerless to act against the overarching patriarchal system because of political or religious constraints. For example, despite her high rank as a Sayyadina, Chani's wish to participate in battle is brushed aside (p.457: "She took a deep breath, accepting this as a desert woman accepted all necessities in the midst of a life involved with death"), Jessica is repeatedly verbally forced into submission despite her rank as a Bene Gesserit and the Duke's concubine (by the Duke himself p.53 ; by the Reverend Mother p.23; by Thufir Hawat p.162), and even the Reverend Mother, arguably the only matriarchal-like figure in the book, is ultimately silenced by Paul (p.516).

From the Greek *pater* "father" and *arkhein* "to rule", patriarchy is often defined as a "system of society or government by fathers or elder males of the community"²⁰ where male primogeniture and positions of power are exclusively and knowingly reserved for men. However, a patriarchy isn't just a political system of succession; today, women can be heads of the state and politicians, and yet still live in a patriarchy. Feminist scholars have long debated on the origins of patriarchal societies and their theories (Gazalé, 2019; Walby, 1989; Millett, 2000), and nowadays definitions of patriarchy have evolved with societal changes to point out the countless ramifications of

¹⁹ "While much of *Dune* was based on Arabic concepts, the Faufreluches system is clearly based on feudal European concepts, especially that of the mid-period Holy Roman Empire, an elective monarchy." (Dune Wiki).

²⁰ Etymonline definition.

historical patriarchy and its impacts today. Women have the basic freedom to vote, own a bank account, and become politicians; yet the statistical odds are still stacked against them at various rates, while private gender expectations and public portrayals of gender still shape their lives (Criado-Perez, 2020). Similarly, *Dune*'s patriarchal political system also comes with a set of consequences outside of political succession and power status. In fact, even the Bene Gesserit's female-only ranks does not mean that they are a matriarchal organisation. We criticise this reading of the Bene Gesserit as blind to its wider context: the Bene Gesserit do not work against the Imperium's patriarchal system, but rather within it. They control the politics from behind the scenes and jeopardise the Emperor's inheritance by forbidding him to have a son, but certainly not with the plan to replace him with an Empress.

When the Reverend Mother explains the Landsraad's system to Jessica, the latter criticises the Bene Gesserit's general indifference to its injustice (pp.24-25) but ultimately concludes "I am Bene Gesserit: I exist only to serve" (p.25) which the Reverend mother says she means truthfully. She can detect truth; Jessica isn't being ironic. She really believes in her role as a servant, despite the implacable sacrifices. In her work, Kennedy remarks that "the women of *Dune* find in religion an avenue to assume agency and power that otherwise might not be available to them in a feudal society or a real-world religion." (Kennedy, 2024). Indeed, *Dune*'s system is patriarchal, medieval even (as seen with *kanly*, the warrior code and the *fief* system). The only outlet of power for women is to be Bene Gesserit: a priestess, a wife or a concubine. Moreover, from a social class perspective, the Bene Gesserit constitute an infinitesimal part of all the women in *Dune*'s universe, a very select elite. The Bene Gesserit enjoy their power at the price of their own member's subservience, but also the condemnation of all other women who exist in this patriarchy and have no say in it. *Dune*'s first novel is very traditional in that way, but this system changes by the start of the second book, before taking an even bigger revolutionary stance with the rest of the saga. Oliebos has made a compelling analysis tackling this enormous corpus, saying that "what supports reading *Dune* as progressive and not as something that supports oppressive male dominance, is its gradual progression towards a stronger female presence, which is fully realised in books 5 and 6 of *Dune*" (Oliebos, 2021, pp.7-8). Since this thesis focuses on the first book, incidentally our findings and conclusion will be different. In fact, further in-depth research like we did here could be applied to the other books to reveal new insights on *Dune*'s treatment of gender. Specifically, it might challenge or support Oliebos' claim that the Bene Gesserit sisterhood functions as "a key subversive element of the patriarchy and the general masculine norm in *Dune*." (Ibid, p.8), which we showed to be at least untrue for its first novel.

As described in the previous chapter, the Bene Gesserit are widely distrusted and feared in the Imperium. The reason is simple: they posit a threat to the order, since they do not operate with the same limits as the rest of the political world. They can use the Voice to make anything happen

and use Truthsay to call out any political ploy, although that can be parried by plausible deniability, which is precisely how the Baron ascertains his coup on the Atrides. In *Dune*, it is common to see people, especially men, distrust Bene Gesserit women and even insult them as witches because they appear as a threat to them. The particular insults hurled at them, mainly at Jessica and Irulan, positions this hate as relevant to misogyny. The constant witch-calling in *Dune* (no less than 56 times: pp.21, 166, etc.) reminds us of the dark history behind it. Witch branding and witch hunts have been established as gender-based violence (Saikia, 2023; Chachra, 2025), the most infamous of which were the European and American witch hunts²¹ and a recent example of which are the Indian witch brandings: the National Crime Records Bureau estimated that over 2500 women died in this manner since 2000 (Lakhera, 2024). Witch accusations have long been made to force dissident, knowledgeable or powerful women to submit, as well as to seize their possessions. Superstitions play a role, but the main motivation remains socio-economic, patriarchal domination. *Dune* once again took a real-life gender issue and applied it to its universe, with important implications. Many men in the Imperium fear the Bene Gesserit and therefore wish to crush them. Since they do not have the power to do so, given how deeply embedded in the system and how trained they are, branding them as witches comes as the next best thing. The slur is seemingly harmless enough to be used carelessly and thrown around like an acceptable insult, granting them a shred of illusory control over their deep fear of them. The Bene Gesserit are aware of their reputation but enjoy enough political power to treat this gender-based violence as empty threats. That doesn't stop other people, mainly men, to insult them to their faces even despite their superior social standing, as seen when Hawat openly suspects her of being a traitor and states that he first answers to the Duke (pp.163-164).

In fact, the Bene Gesserit order even plays on this fear and hate of them to entertain a certain mystique, making a strong impression on the court. Their goal benefits from the patriarchy, because it is through male primogeniture and Bene Gesserit wives that they put their agents in positions of power, control the succession, gather the necessary genetic material from the men and advance in their quest for the Kwisatz Haderach. They uphold the patriarchy by forcing their members to marry high-up men, then to carry and educate their heirs. Their goal to put a Bene Gesserit on the throne (p.517) does not mean they want to install a matriarchy in the Imperium; Irulan will be Paul's royal wife, but not an Empress. Their motto "That which submits rules" (p.28) summarises it simply. What is more, their total belief in deterministic biology and eugenics (Gender Determinism p.20) further pushes them on a dystopic path: the individual does not matter and can be sacrificed in the name of their plan. Their complete disregard for personal dignity and freedom

²¹ 'Witch Trials in Early Modern Europe and New England', UC Berkeley Law: <https://www.law.berkeley.edu/research/the-robbins-collection/exhibitions/witch-trials-in-early-modern-europe-and-new-england/> .

shows whenever they scheme: they sacrifice the Atreides bloodline like a pawn ("Goodbye, young human. I hope you make it. But if you don't -- well, we shall yet succeed." P.29), abandon one of their own, Jessica, and order Lady Fenring to have sex with Feyd-Rautha and carry his child. The latter's condescending but honest statement that her partner's part "is the easy part" (p.364) implies that her task is not easy. Contrary to what they show, Bene Gesserit do not have total control over the Imperium either. We see this through their failure to control Paul and Jessica's desertion, as well as Jessica's explanation in the face of Hawat's mistrust:

"If I desired a puppet, the Duke would marry me," she said. "He might even think he did it of his own free will." [...]

"Why aren't you out destroying the Duke's enemies?" he asked. [...]

"Power's a two-edged sword, Thufir," she said; "You think: 'How easy for her to shape a human tool to thrust into an enemy's vitals.' True, Thufir; even into your vitals. Yet, what would I accomplish? If enough of us Bene Gesserit did this, wouldn't it make all Bene Gesserit suspect? We don't want that, Thufir. We do not wish to destroy ourselves." She nodded. "We truly exist only to serve." (p.168).

In this passage, Jessica reveals exactly where the Bene Gesserit's influence and power stops. They must be very cautious about wielding such powers. Hiding behind a smoke screen of secrecy and superstitions enables them to truly act from behind the scenes. Too much outward show of power would destroy their order; that which submits rules, therefore the Bene Gesserit seek to rule under the cover of submission. In her analysis of feminist utopias, Johns points out that "to survive, the dependant must become a careful reader of personalities, knowing when and how to avoid manipulation but being able to exploit opportunities for improving a pitiful situation by appealing to the conscience or self-interest of superiors. Feminist utopian authors conceiv[e] their narratives by looking from the position of the underling [...]" (Johns, 2010, p.7). That is exactly what the Bene Gesserit repeatedly do, why they focus so much on emotional manipulation and control. This truly demonstrates how the Bene Gesserit is complicit in *Dune's* patriarchal system, in which they do not work toward personal freedom and equality but rather the sacrifice of the individual in the pursuit of what they decided were humanity's best interests.

1.1 Concubines, Wives and the Instrumentalization of Sex

A very strong symptom of a patriarchal system is the constant emphasis on male sexuality and female desirability. In her analysis of the Bene Gesserit, Lapointe points out that "like in many real patriarchal societies, Caladan and Arrakeen²² women are either degraded or put on a pedestal but never viewed as equal human beings." (Lapointe, 2022). This chapter will uncover how this patriarchal conception of womanhood rules over the women of *Dune*.

²² Adjective for the women of Arrakis, the desert planet-fief where the story unfolds.

The Bene Gesserit knowingly use patriarchal notions such as virginity (p.23) and the power of seduction to their own ends, at the expense of totally confounding their members into these stereotypes, profoundly altering their sense of self-worth. Bene Gesserit women might be powerful and cunning; but as we see with Jessica, they are not free, and they still long for true love, respect, and belonging. Jessica remains angry that the Duke had never married her, conferring much importance to the title of wife over that of a concubine. When she describes herself, she says: "I'm not noble born. I'm the bound concubine of the Duke Leto." (p.56). Since the Duke never legally married her, she often reflects with bitterness that she cannot use the adjective of "wife" (p.133), the word "concubine" being used almost as a slur to insult her (p.193). In an earlier chapter, the Duke explains the political strategy that pushed him not to marry her (p.112), expressing regret and lamenting the Great Houses' moral degeneration. Just as this choice deeply hurt Jessica, the Duke is also a man feeling the gender role strain in this patriarchal system; he could not marry the woman he loved, having to maintain the façade of being a "marriable Duke", permitted as many concubines as he wants, but only one wife. Chani's fate as Paul's concubine, while Irulan is his royal wife, makes Jessica protest that her son is perpetuating the same mistakes, but Paul forces his political strategy over both women ("Paul!" Jessica snapped. "Don't make the mistake your father made!" "She's a princess," Paul said. "She's my key to the throne, and that's all she'll ever be [...]" P.508). Jessica's stance about the status of wife and concubine evolves throughout the book. She is first truly resentful of not being a wife, but upon seeing her son's interest in Chani, her first reflex is to enforce the same choice, even turning it into a political and strategic obligation as well:

"Paul must be cautioned about their women. One of these desert women would not do as wife to a Duke. As concubine, yes, but not as wife. [...] And she saw how well she had been conditioned. I can think of the marital needs of royalty without once weighing my own concubinage. Yet... I was more than concubine." (p.333).

Jessica justifies her caution regarding her son's romantic entanglements by political interests, but her immediate paranoia upon them meeting the Fremen concerns their women as a generalisation. Sexual enticement as a way to lure the ducal heir is common, so much so that Paul is explicitly trained to pick up on it (p.154-155). Sexual political ploys have the consequence of warping Jessica's view of every woman approaching Paul as a potential threat. Moreover, she perpetuates the same oppressive system that forced her to remain a concubine, putting political interests before true love, but also above rank, which is something that she holds in very high esteem since she mentions it repeatedly (p.56, 133, 333...). To her, a lower-class Fremen woman cannot therefore be married to a Duke; she would be "good enough" as a concubine, but not a wife. Moreover, Jessica's portrayal of Chani as a temptress seems odd, since they have known her for two days at most by then, and her actions have nothing out of the ordinary for a Fremen warrior. Jessica referred to her as a "girl-child" (p.323), since both her and Paul are around fifteen years old. Around three years later, after Chani gives birth to Leto II, Jessica still criticises their "marriage of

youth” but accepts their son and eventually changes her mind, accepting Chani (p.413). By the end, Jessica’s opinion changes, and her Bene Gesserit “conditioning” slowly morphs as she is being abandoned and renegaded by her Order. Once again, the importance she confers to the status of wife is shown when she utters a statement that concludes *Dune*’s whole narration:

"See that princess standing there, so haughty and confident. They say she has pretensions of a literary nature. Let us hope she finds solace in such things; she'll have little else." A bitter laugh escaped Jessica. "Think on it, Chani: that princess will have the name, yet she'll live as less than a concubine -- never to know a moment of tenderness from the man to whom she's bound. While we, Chani, we who carry the name of concubine -- history will call us wives." (p.529).

Ironically, in the Appendix IV, an excerpt of an official document on the Great Houses called the Almanak Al-Ashraf, Lady Jessica is not listed as the Duke’s wife: she is referred to as “Mother of Duke Paul Muad’Dib, an “honorary Atreides”, and in the next entry as the Duke’s “formal concubine” (p.554). This title underlines how much the feudal and aristocratic system in the *Dune* universe values formal marriage and bloodlines. Jessica’s actions and loyalty earn her a form of symbolic nobility, yet this detail in her entry also shows the tragic dignity of her position: honoured, but never officially recognised. Her insistence that they will be remembered as wives is striking, because it shows that she attributes more importance to that than the title of Duchess she has just acquired. Indeed, during the redistribution of titles after Paul’s victory, Jessica herself requires Caladan (p.528) and is later made the very first Duchess of the Imperium²³. Even though the Appendix proves that history did not confer her the title of wife, she has in fact just made history by being the first Duchess in the Imperium. In fact, Lady Jessica is much more than a wife or a concubine for most of the book, since she leaves the ducal house very early. Her actions have in part led her and her son to victory; yet the whole book finishes on this statement. It is meant to be freeing for her, since she asserts that no matter her official title, she thinks history will remember her as wife; but it is a very small freedom that stays within the narrow traditional roles that women can have in *Dune*.

Furthermore, because of Jessica’s bitterness, Irulan receives a terrible treatment by the Atreides. Whereas usually the status of a powerful Duke’s wife is something that confers respect for a female character, Irulan’s case is totally different. Chani appears jealous of her, Paul treats her as a simple object for social ascendancy, and Jessica speaks of her with contempt as she describes her fate in a loveless marriage with Paul. Whereas Jessica desperately wants to convince herself and Chani that the title of concubine does not take away from the real love they share with their partner (p.529), when it comes to Irulan this positive portrayal changes. Her title of wife is fake, as she will live as “less than a concubine” (p.529), which Jessica seems happy about in a

²³ Entry for “Duchess” in the Dune Wiki.

vengeful way. Even though Irulan's motives are the same as Jessica's once were (avoid bloodshed and safeguard Bene Gesserit interests), she is treated as little more than an annoying prize after Paul's victory over the Emperor. Her actions in the story did not warrant such hate; she even facilitate Paul's deal, using her Bene Gesserit soothsay training to persuade the Emperor ("\"Father,\" she said, and her voice was silky soft, soothing. [...] \"But here's a man fit to be your son,\" she said.\" p.517 [...] \"She touched his arm, spoke soothingly: \"For this I was trained, Father.\"\" p.527). As explained when recounting her education, Irulan's childhood at the Creche was already harsh, and she knowingly sacrifices away her life as the wife of a man who will never love her. Even her only important role, the role of a scholar, is scoffed at by Jessica. The word 'haughty' (pp.522 and 529) is used twice in the whole book, reserved for her character. This word is a degrading alternative compared to the way other Bene Gesserit women such as Jessica are positively described as 'regal' or 'stately'. All three suggest a dignified, confident bearing, but the connotations are definitively negative in Irulan's case. Another comparison with the movie here reveals that a modern adaptation picked up on Irulan's mistreatment and decided to make her character more active. Rather than being discussed as an object to be passed from her father to Paul like she has no say in her own life (p.516), in the movie she takes the first step and offers her willing hand in exchange for her father's life (*Part Two*, 03:34:00).

Jessica's political obsession with titles should not act as a smoke screen; most marriages in *Dune* are arranged and miserable. Irulan's sacrifice is an example, and her insights on the Royal Creche (p.280) describing the ruthless treatment of the 'slave-concubines' gives us the sense that the genuine love between Jessica and Leto is the exception to the rule. Instead of the simple title of concubine, the Royal Creche goes further and brands those women as slaves as well, looking them over like cattle and declaring their fate as a gift for future bribes or rewards for other men, presumably ("She is too beautiful. We will save her as a gift. " p.280). The Bene Gesserit knowingly encourage objectifying women to ensure their Order's political prowess; reducing them to well-trained objects of desire for the concubines or scary Truthsayers. In fact, Bene Gesserit women themselves are aware of their objectification and self-recognise as "broodmares" (p.211, 364), a term that truly annihilates their humanity by reducing them to an animal destined for breeding. Lady Fenring is the most striking example, since the story follows her act of seduction and duty for pregnancy. Her character is the epitome of weaponised female sexuality: both her descriptions and her sole role in the story are sexual in nature. When she is introduced, her beautiful figure is described by Feyd-Rautha who is immediately attracted to her, boldly asking for her permission to dedicate his arena kill to her (p.346-347). Later, even the Baron notes her beauty, comparing it to a young boy of his tastes (p.362). Her appearance, her every word and movement are made pleasing to her male audience. This is her only scene, in which her goal is to seduce Feyd-Rautha: she is even referred to as a "brood-mother" (p.364). After that, in the book her character is never seen or

mentioned again. This puts the morality of the Bene Gesserit sexual and reproductive labour in a dubious position. It does not only objectify their bodies and instrumentalise their sexualities; it also does so without their full free will, conditioning them to simply obey orders.

In *Dune*, the sex that is alluded to is mainly presented as a female threat, while the normal, healthy sex that does happen is taboo. Culturally, sexuality tends to fall under the type of subjects that narratives avoid showing too much. Lady Fenring, Jessica and Chani all become pregnant off-page, but the sexually tense scenes that are shown are the ones where sex is being used as a weapon or a subterfuge. Essentially, in *Dune* the only birth control technique relies entirely on women, making each sexual act a potential political catastrophe for male heirs. We already analysed the passage where elite Arrakeen women aim to seduce Paul at the dinner scene (pp.138-157), where one of them is a spy under the guise of an escort service. Lady Fenring's Bene Gesserit orders to control the progeniture of an elite Great House imply that their members are trained to entice ("neuro-enticement" p.280). The order does not hesitate to wield sex like a weapon to their advantage, but in this process they weaponise women's bodies and victimise the men. However, men being victims of sexual enticement does not mean that *Dune's* patriarchal system is revoked. It is precisely because the patriarchy confers such importance to sex, heritability and marriage that Bene Gesserit women weaponised it. By capitalising on the importance that *Dune's* patriarchal society confers to sex, the Bene Gesserit reinforce these norms, turning the patriarchal structures of sex against men. Some male heirs exhibit a remarkable lack of reproductive control: their seemingly forgotten descendancy is often the subject of a plot that involved their reckless sexuality. In a society that puts so much emphasis on descendancy, family names, and blood, the overuse of this lever of power for *Dune's* women warps their image. Secretive women with unknown motives, strange women from even stranger cultures; Jessica's reaction to Fremen women showcases how far this oversexualisation goes (p.154-155). If Paul is trained to pay attention to those sexual attacks, Harkonnen men fall for it twice. First, the Baron, who is Jessica's father from an unnamed Bene Gesserit; second, Feyd-Rautha with Lady Fenring. Their carelessness with their sexuality constitutes a weakness that the Bene Gesserit do not miss. Their exploitation of this weakness could, in theory, produce other heirs that could challenge the Harkonnen's title. But since they do not seek to dominate, but rather to control via their own submission, they simply order their sexual spies to produce female heirs who will not challenge the political system.

1.2 Gendered Violence and Sexual Violence

Forced sexual acts are actually very common in *Dune*. Bene Gesserit servitude includes sexual tasks and the instrumentalisation of their bodies, but their seduction techniques on the men could also be defined as morally dubious. If the narration does not depict actual consensual sex (contrary to the movie, in *Part Two*), it does portray rape and sexual violence. On the night of the assault on

Arrakis, Jessica's fate goes through several hands. At first, she is a prize for Pieter, the Baron's Mentat:

"I have a surprise for Piter," the Baron said. "He thinks he has come here to collect his reward--you, Lady Jessica. But I wish to demonstrate a thing: that he does not really want you." [...] "Understand yourself, Piter. You want her because she was a Duke's woman, a symbol of his power--beautiful, useful, exquisitely trained for her role. But an entire duchy, Piter! That's more than a symbol; that's the reality. With it you could have many women . . . and more." (pp. 176-177).

The Mentat's desire for Jessica stems from her status as a Duke's woman, but initially he covets to possess her, or at least to inflict bodily harm on her to satisfy his sadistic penchant as he does not think he can get the real title of a Duke ("You promised me the Lady Jessica. You promised her to me." "For what, Piter?" the Baron asked. "For pain?" p.18). Once Pieter is given the status he coveted from his possession of Jessica, he discards her into the hands of Harkonnen agents tasked with disposing of her in the desert. Jessica escapes Pieter's violence because the Baron did not relish his grasp on her yet: he still considers her a political asset and a conquered enemy. It would be dangerous for Piter to violate her in a way the Baron did not sanction. However, once she is in the hands of the Harkonnen agents, the narrative makes itself somewhat more explicit:

"Sure do seem a shame to waste a good-looking woman like this," Scarface said. "You ever have any highborn types?" He turned to look at the pilot. [...] He can see me plain enough, Jessica thought. She brought her bound legs up onto the seat, curled into a sinuous ball, staring at Scarface. "Real pretty, she is," Kinet said. He wet his lips with his tongue. "Sure do seem a shame." He looked at Czigo. "You thinking what I think you're thinking?" the pilot asked. "Who'd be to know?" the guard asked. "Afterwards . . ." He shrugged. "I just never had me no highborns. Might never get a chance like this one again." [...] Czigo turned, said: "Ah-h-h, look." He reached out for Jessica's skirt." (pp.181-182).

Despite the word "rape" never being named, the discussion implies it in its tone and setting: two men discussing their thought process in forcing themselves on a prisoner, to "have" her. As Millett justly points out in *Sexual Politics*, "the language indicates the underlying issue of power" (Millett, 1970, p.5): "you ever have any highborn types?" does not concern itself with consent, but only masculine possession. Rape in *Dune*, when it is explicit, is about power. In its society, a man of lower status has less power and privileges than a noble woman; however, the specific violence of rape transcends both class and gender. This can be seen with Jessica's scene but also the Baron's slave boys who are shown to be targets of rape (p.200). The idea of 'having a high-born' seems to be a fantasy among lower status men; as long as the Duke was alive, Jessica was protected from rape just because of her rank, but without him her rank excites desire for her possession. At the confluence of patriarchal systems of oppression, *Dune* describes how even powerful women are in danger of being abused, since they are seen as prized objects of desire.

At the same time, Jessica's body is emphasized by herself in this scene. "She brought her bound legs up onto the seat, curled into a sinuous ball, staring at Scarface" implies sensuality and

seduction which seem out of place if Jessica is not consenting. In fact, the adjective “sinuous” is used twice in this chapter, which are the only times the word is used in a sexual sense rather than a literal description of curves. Ultimately, Jessica’s rape does not happen because she uses her body to entice and command her captors. Showcasing how Bene Gesserit women weaponize patriarchal norms to their own ends, Jessica acts like she goes along in her own rape scenario. Using her Bene Gesserit training, she sets out to entice them:

Jessica twisted her neck, spat out the gag. She pitched her voice in low, intimate tones. "Gentlemen! No need to fight over me." At the same time, she writhed sinuously for Kinet's benefit. She held her face high in the instrument glow to be sure Kinet would read her lips, said: "You mustn't disagree." They drew farther apart, glanced warily at each other. "Is any woman worth fighting over?" she asked. By uttering the words, by being there, she made herself infinitely worth their fighting. [...] "Wouldn't you rather have me cooperative?" Jessica asked. "Give the boy a chance." Her lip curled in a sneer. "Little enough chance he'd have out there in that sand. Give him that and . . . " She smiled. "You could find yourself well rewarded." (pp.182-183).

Jessica’s mastery over her own sexual appeal and her use of the Voice to make the men kill each other in competition can be taken as a power move from her: the best scenario for a rape victim whose powerlessness is their greatest nightmare. This is an example of how women’s bodies are weaponised, a point we made in the last chapter. The difference here is that instead of using it for Bene Gesserit motives, Jessica is forced to use it for her own survival. She does so by using her sex appeal as a weapon to give the impression of submitting, stroking the ego of other men to better control them. However, Jessica’s cunning also shows the darkest sides of *Dune*’s patriarchal violence, where she is forced to weaponise her body and pretend to go along in her own rape.

The sexual violence of *Dune* and its problematic portrayal of sexuality we evoked in the last chapter is further degraded by the fact that homosexuality in *Dune* does not exist outside paedophilia. It is linked to sexual violence because it villainises another minority, that of homosexuals. The only non-heterosexual figure in *Dune* is the Baron, whose sexual orientation cannot be classified as anything other than paedophilic. He hungers for Paul’s “sweet young body” (p.20), orders his men to provide him with young slaves whom he rapes ("Bring me that young fellow we bought on Gamont [...] Drug him well. I don't feel like wrestling." [...] the one who looks so much like the young Paul Atreides." p.200). He also makes several incestual remarks of the same type on his nephew’s body (p.258). Similarly to how Bene Gesserit exploit sex as a moment of weakness, Feyd-Rautha comes up with a plan to kill his uncle while he is raping another slave boy by putting a poisoned needle on his thigh (pp.394-401). Harkonnen sexuality in that chapter is entirely weaponised, as the Baron punishes his nephew by forcing him to kill all the women in the pleasure wing (p.401). The Harkonnen Great House is the only house that explicitly possesses and depicts such pleasure quarters, associating their sexuality with concepts of forced sexual labour and violence. The Baron’s sexuality is entangled with his cruelty and decadence; not

once do we get the impression that the sex is consensual. Moreover, his sexual tastes are heavily villainised and present classical problematic tropes that were common in 1960s fiction, in which homosexuality was often associated with paedophilia and associated with moral corruption (Reiff-Shanks, 2022). This stigma and its popular negative portrayal of homosexuality exist because in a patriarchal system, the dominant power dynamic must always remain heterosexual: queerness in *Dune* “[...] symbolically disrupts the natural order of Herbert’s worldbuilding. Across the books, the point of sex is reproduction.” (Yuill, 2023). Thus, to conserve the dominant narratives, diverging sexualities and identities were villainised and depreciated. Again, a comparison with the way the movie has adapted problematic depictions of the Baron shows the divergence with Hollywood’s standards. In the movie, there is no mention of the Baron’s sexuality, and the only homoerotic hint linked to his character is when he kisses Feyd-Rautha during his coronation (*Part Two*, 01:26:00).

The ethics of the Bene Gesserit Plan are also part of the question on sexual violence. Past the instrumentalisation of women, forced marriages and forced pregnancies, the Bene Gesserit *modus operandi* arguably involves forcing sexual acts upon men and women alike. In fact, male characters even appear powerless in the face of Bene Gesserit sexual powers. In all the couples we see with a Bene Gesserit, it seems like the timing of the pregnancy as well as the education of the child is entirely up to the woman. In the elite circles where Bene Gesserit are postured, the male heir’s sexualities constitute a solid Bene Gesserit hold on them. The Baron, despite never manifesting interest in women given his clear homosexual tastes, is said to be Jessica’s father: surely a fine politician like him would pay close attention to whom could challenge his throne, and therefore to whom he has sex with. This begs the question of how the Bene Gesserit truly seduce the heirs. The closest answer we get is when Lady Fenring discusses her impending coupling with Feyd-Rautha. At the moment of her visit on Giedi Prime, Feyd is seventeen and clearly attracted to her (pp.346-364: ““You don’t anticipate difficulty seducing him, my little brood-mother?” “No, my love. You saw how he looked at me.”). Even if he wasn’t attracted to her, her mission involves seducing him, meaning that she could force him no matter his real consent. The movie elaborates on this: in the movie, Feyd-Rautha is depicted being seduced in a way that resembles being drugged—he states that he “knows her Bene Gesserit tricks” and yet continues to follow Lady Fenring to her chambers (*Part Two*, 01:21:50-01:25:45). Disoriented, the Harkonnen heir states that he doesn’t recognise the place where he comes to his senses, lost in his own abode while Fenring leads him surely to her bed. Moreover, she uses the Voice on him and makes him kneel, as the camera shows his expression of mixed desire and confusion. The addition of the Gom Jabbar test being performed on him before Fenring undertakes any sexual act heightens the sense that the Harkonnen heir is helpless in front of her. His confusion during the first part of the scene begs the question of consent, subsequently leaving us to wonder if Fenring raped him after he took the test. Despite his youth, Feyd-Rautha

has the ambition to sit on the Imperial throne; it seems curious that he would allow Fenring to simply disappear with a potential heir. Bene Gesserit sexual control is thus dubiously consensual for both parties involved. However, even though sexual activities are thus more female-controlled, this does not mean that it is done in a very subversive way. Bene Gesserit women justify their actions to themselves because they are conditioned to sacrifice their free will to seduce, survive and safeguard genetic material; but we often have no real perspective on their own agency. For Lady Fenring, it is clear that she weaponises her own body in an act she implies is unpleasant (p. 364), while in Jessica's case, we can see that she also procreates as a real act of love (p. 23, 204, and 313).

Sexual violence can be presented in many different forms: in *Dune*, it also takes the form of a direct portrayal of eugenics. Historically, eugenics ideologies regularly know a period of resurgence during and after periods of pandemics and civil unrest; for example, after the Spanish Influenza or WWII (Olatunji, 2022; Sear, 2025). More recently, eugenics were rebranded through so-called pronatalist movements and "Great Replacement" fearmongering narratives (Rumberger & Darnovsky, 2024). The President of the United States has repeatedly endorsed eugenicist ideas, notably with his answer to the COVID-19 health crisis (Bagenstos, 2021; Fang & Rieger, 2016). Eugenics can adopt different forms, but the most well-known instance in Western history boils down to positive eugenics, such as selective breeding of handpicked individuals who are deemed genetically superior (for example, "Aryan" women in Nazi Germany) with the goal of improving "human stock" (a concept also mentioned in *Dune* p.13). The second kind, negative eugenics, involves actively pruning the population, preventing certain individuals from reproducing by forced sterilisation or extermination. The Holocaust is an example, but negative eugenics also appeared during less well-known moments: "the basic concept [of negative eugenics] was embraced in the United States early in the 20th century. Laws permitting forced sterilization of women, the mentally ill, gay people and those considered child rapists were passed across the country; they intended to purify the population. In the years Washington's sterilization laws were in effect, some 700 people — the vast majority women (75%) — were forcibly sterilized [...]" (Berger, 2020). As this last statement shows, women are most often the direct target of reproductive laws, which is why eugenics are related to gender issues.

Both kinds of eugenics make an appearance in *Dune*. Herbert borrowed directly from the father of eugenics, Francis Galton; where Galton spoke of a "Jehad" (Galton, 1908), *Dune* speaks of a "Jihad" or a "Holy War", an inevitable feature of its humanity that pushes humans to mix their genes, to avoid the "stagnation of the race" (p.235). Through the logic of negative eugenics, only the strongest survive the Holy War and pass on their genes in a great "pooling of genes" (p.214) that Paul sees in his prescience, while the weakest perish. Secondly, positive eugenics are the *raison d'être* for the Bene Gesserit breeding program, where desirable genes are passed down and carefully crossed to produce the Kwisatz Haderach. Even if Paul distantly criticizes it (p.13),

eugenic concerns guide the whole story, and we saw in an earlier chapter (Gender Determinism p.20) how *Dune*'s deterministic undercurrent guides and justifies its gender portrayal. In the context of sexual violence, this further begs the question of how willing the Bene Gesserit are in their own bodily implication in the eugenic program. These women's roles in the breeding scheme are implied to be disturbing to themselves: Jessica herself wonders at her unknown mother, indicating that she would have disliked having to bear a Harkonnen daughter ("The Bene Gesserit who bore me and gave me to the Sisters because that's what she was commanded to do. Was she glad to rid herself of a Harkonnen child?" p.219). Furthermore, we can see with Count Fenring's character that such eugenic inbreeding sometime ends up in sterile results, as he is infertile (a "genetic-eunuch" p.511). This is a slippery slope since he is thus considered a "failed" attempt at producing the Kwisatz Haderach (p.526), discarded in the breeding plan. Sexual violence can thus also take the form of sexual prohibition and sterilisation.

Eugenic ideologies and practices are inherently linked to issues of gender, due to their mandatory repression and objectification of women, their logic of reproductive pressure and their justification for the loss of individual freedom. Historically, we have seen that eugenic ideologies impact women first, making their bodies and reproductive capabilities mere tools of pseudo-science with no regard for their real desires. Similarly, the Bene Gesserit plan represents a severe infringement on women's freedom, which Jessica struggles with throughout the story: her childhood and teenage years were spent being shaped and tormented by her education, both mind and body ("I both love and hate you," Jessica said. "The hate --that's from pains I must never forget." P.11 and "Jessica looked down at her right hand, flexed the fingers, remembering the pain, the terror, the anger." p.23), and once she joined the Atreides as an adult, her order was content to keep her as a concubine rather than let her marry the Duke. The order also vehemently criticises her reproductive choices (pp.23-24), condemning her defiance over her orders of having a daughter ("You were told to bear only daughters to the Atreides." p.24), and her choice of producing what they call the abomination, a child who has consumed the Water of Life in utero ("Her mother deserves a punishment greater than anything in history. Death! It cannot come too quickly for that child or for the one who spawned her!" p.499). Jessica's choice of having a daughter, which she admits was a desperate choice made out of love and instinct because of the Duke's impending death, is qualified as a betrayal by the order ("Long were we warned against such a one and how to prevent such a birth, but one of our own has betrayed us." p.499). Despite Jessica's choice ending up being the right one, as her son is indeed the Kwisatz Haderach desired by the Bene Gesserit, the Reverend Mother treats her as her inferior, which Paul fights back against ("I see that your son is indeed the one. For that you can be forgiven even the abomination of your daughter." Paul stilled a cold, piercing anger, said: "You've never had the right or cause to forgive my mother anything!" p.515). Paul's anger against the order and his description of his 'instinct for rightness' (p.13) being

offended when the Reverend Mother first reveals the Bene Gesserit plan to him illustrates how the order's actions and treatment of their own female members can shock the characters. However, even if he disagrees with their methods, Paul still ascribes to their underlying ideology of eugenic breeding, as he acknowledges the possibility of a Jihad.

Chapter Three: Insights into *Dune*'s Gender Dystopia

When we explained in this thesis' introduction that "the juxtaposition of utopian ideals can translate into dystopian features of a society," (Introduction p.7), we sought to show how *Dune* dealt with utopian and dystopian conceptions of gender, how its political system built around those concepts and formed a whole universe ruled by them. Now that our comprehensive analysis of *Dune*'s gender portrayal is done, we can turn to the assertion that it is a gender dystopia.

Considering all of our past arguments on gender, we showed that *Dune*'s political and social organisation offers generally traditional features regarding gender. While it stays stereotypically traditional in the performance of gender specifically, the story likes to play with gender expectations; but despite some of its universe's features seemingly appealing to an alternative treatment of gender, it remains deeply woven into a masculine norm while maintaining the feminine as the Other. However, *Dune*'s subcurrent of criticism regarding religious fanaticism and strong leaders also means that it is criticising the system overall. Criticising the system and showing characters who are conscious of their misdeeds offers nuance, and most importantly a leeway into real-world comparisons. Most of the important figures show a critical duality: Paul is the Messiah hero, yet he criticises the methods he used to gain the upper hand. Jessica is a powerful, trained Bene Gesserit concubine, and yet she disobeys her superiors and defects the Order that sacrificed her family. Leto is a competent leader, yet he criticises the flaws of the political system and its moral shortcomings. Such criticism is invaluable because it shows that *Dune*'s apparent story of triumph on its villains does not come without its pitfalls. On the contrary, the way the human is treated by the end of the story with the beginning of the Jihad is precisely what Paul tried to avoid throughout his whole journey, ending *Dune*'s story on a bleak, critical note.

Following this often-ignored undercurrent of political and philosophical criticism, we can see that both utopian and dystopian aspects exist in *Dune*. From a certain point of view, the Bene Gesserit order harbours some features of a utopia: they use a new form of technology ("innate" biological and molecular control) for the betterment of humanity, and they ensure that the Imperial system does not fail by planning every conflict ahead. They seek to improve humans to be able to ensure humanity's freedom from thinking machines (p.12). They have developed their inner biological abilities to a point where they can neutralise most poisons, mould their voice to manipulate others, and decide the sex of their offspring among others. They put heavy emphasis on their purpose, their plan which safeguards certain genes and controls politics from behind the throne and the Great Houses. As a female order, its members are postured everywhere in the Imperium, besides powerful members of the system; some are concubines, some serve as Truthsayers and advisors. Yet, this plan for the betterment of humanity operates at heavy costs, and in practicality warps its utopian elements into a gender dystopia. Their female ranks are just as conditioned as the male armies are with the warrior religion; Bene Gesserit women are educated

and trained to accept anything that is asked of them by the Order. As we have shown in previous chapters, this includes sexual manipulation, forced loveless marriages and submission to their buyers.

In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), a book hailed as one of the first feminist utopias, we can see a true feminist utopia where women are encouraged as children to become whatever they want, they make their own choices in the pursuit of freedom and happiness. This utopia describes a selfless society that educates not to exert control, but rather to achieve true happiness. It is still flawed, with the glaring problem that men seemingly cannot exist in such a utopian society. Using *Herland* among other utopias, Johns' five-point feminist utopia model (Johns, 2010) includes features that can be found warped with the Bene Gesserit, illustrating our point:

First, Johns describes the **centrality of education** in feminist utopias; there are often institutions, monastery-like and described in great detail, where women can have access to education as a way to overturn their subordinate status. The Bene Gesserit schools describe girls being educated in biology, political sciences, and many other subjects (p.146). Many times, their members are pictured as instructors: the Reverend Mother Mohiam, Jessica, even Irulan as a scholar. Some select best students become the most respected members, the Reverend Mothers, but the vast majority remain subordinated, their "service wenches" (even Jessica is treated so, p.7). Despite putting emphasis on women's training and skills, contrary to *Herland* the Bene Gesserit do not use education as a route to emancipation; rather, they drill this education into their members to control them for their own plans. Moreover, this education does not grant them freedom from the patriarchal system; it grants them the knowledge to be able to manipulate it. Despite holding enormous power, the Bene Gesserit education does not serve to give agency to its members, but to drill them toward the order's goal.

Secondly, Johns observes that feminist utopias adopt a **view of human nature as malleable and social rather than determined, fallen and individualist**: "feminists have generally viewed human beings as at least partially alterable from within [...] feminists furthered the idea that individuals' experience shaped their development ('nurture versus nature')" (Johns, 2010, p.6). As we have shown with *Dune*'s mix of biological determinism and gender essentialism, the people of *Dune* put stock in both nature and nurture. By using education and training, the Bene Gesserit seek to elevate nurture over nature, but postulate that nature, or instincts, will always be the main factor guiding human behaviour. Since this feature involves "looking from the position of the underling" and "hold[ing] out a hope in the canny and persuasive strengths of the powerless" (p.7), it de facto involves keeping the status quo between men and women. In addition, Johns states that this utopian feature often ends up in "separatist communities from which men have been banished [...]"

suggesting that men are irremediably power-hungry or violent” since nurture over nature would not apply to them (Johns, 2010, p.6), which is *Herland*’s big flaw. In *Dune*, Paul absconds this rule as a male trained in the Bene Gesserit ways. However, he is an exception that confirms the rule, since he is still described inside a nature over nurture framework, performing an “instinctual” hegemonic masculinity (chapter on Hegemonic Masculinities p. 28). This divide further isolates men and women into different classes and stereotypical gender roles.

Thirdly, feminist utopias depict **a gradualist approach to change, a cumulative approach to history and a shared approach to power**; after the War on Machines, the Bene Gesserit set out for a breeding plan that would span millennia. Our chapter on the historical schism of the older Bene Gesserit schools showed that this process has been in progress long before Paul’s time. They gradually mould political events and cross bloodlines to slowly shift towards the birth of the Kwisatz Haderach who will take humanity on the best path possible. Similarly, in *Herland* the women have a “time-sense [that] was not limited to the hopes and ambitions of an individual life (*Herland*, p.80)”. To do this, the Bene Gesserit understand that they have to lead through the shadows, sharing power with other factions while keeping dominion over family ties. However, inside and outside of the order a hierarchy still exists. Power is not shared as much as it is steered at the cost of individual freedom. Individual sacrifices are made, and utopian feminist ideals are also denied since power still manifests itself as a patriarchy. John’s point that “non-hierarchical decision-making characterizes the small communities that dominate feminist utopian writing” (Johns, p.8) is thus rendered naught in *Dune*.

In her fourth keynote, Johns analyses how feminist utopias have **a dynamic view the environment**; essentially, her point is that feminist utopias often exhibit the values of environmentalism since its authors have a “familiarity with the position of the dependant and the exploited” (Johns, p.10). The confluence of the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of women is a point often raised within the field of ecofeminism. In *Dune*, ecological concerns are aplenty on Arrakis. In fact, the Fremen dream of a Green Paradise is explained in depth with Kyne’s detailed indications of how to terraform its arid deserts, slowly change its climate and build up enough water to start planting plants and change Arrakis into an oasis (Appendix I, *The Ecology of Dune*, p.533). This Fremen dream has been influenced by the Bene Gesserit Missionaria Protectiva, who planted religious prophecies that fit their ecological dream. It is unclear which came first between Kynes and the Missionaria Protectiva, and to which extent one is influenced by the other. It does show that the female order knows enough about environmental issues that they use it to benefit their members. They plant this prophecy to ensure that the Fremen will be amenable to rescue them should the need arise (p.51), but they do not care about Arrakis’s terraforming. On the contrary, the subsequent loss of spice that this would entail would be catastrophic to them, jeopardising their plans by completely overriding the present economic

system of the Imperium and completely stopping intergalactic travel. Once again, the Bene Gesserit use a feature of feminist utopias but turn it against people rather than using it for an immediate improvement.

Finally, Johns points out that feminist utopias are **pragmatic, process-oriented utopias**; the Bene Gesserit and Paul act in accordance with their own predictions for the future: “the ‘end-in-view’ is a provisional goal that derives from a critical understanding of the present –including ‘an awareness of the relational nature of ourselves and our environment’” (Johns, 2010, p.11, citing Erin McKenna). The Bene Gesserit training includes physical aptitudes, bodily mastery like molecular and reproductive control, but it also includes combat, poison recognition, and classes on politics and history that have crucial implications in their world. The order and Paul act on their own utopianism, their “visions that help to organize and structure present experience and dissatisfaction towards a desirable, workable purpose in the future” (Johns, 2010, p.12). While this process is fundamentally utopian, its actual application is not. The Bene Gesserit have effectively looked at their world “from the perspective of women's subordination” (Johns, 2010, p.12) since they wield this subordination to their own ends, but where Johns says that those authors have “conceived different worlds that seek to alter patriarchy and improve the lives of society's powerless” (Ibid), the people who hold power in *Dune* look at their world through their own lens and impose their conclusions on all its inhabitants. They perpetuate the same usual systems of domination, diligently manipulating and repressing all of its actors regardless of their will.

Instead of using all the above utopian features to actively improve the lives of present people, the narrative instead takes away any freedom from the people (first, the Fremen, then all the Imperium with the Jihad) and becomes driven by the visions of one Hero. Herbert's message that “no more terrible disaster could befall your people than for them to fall into the hands of a Hero” (p.296) directly points out how easily a utopia can transform into a dystopia. Ironically, those women sacrifice their freedom and the freedom of others to preserve what they think is the fate of humanity. *Dune's* political system, despite being quietly controlled by women, enforces a heavily patriarchal status quo, as seen with our analysis of its traditional gender portrayal. Under this patriarchal framework, men are treated better than women; however, even they still suffer from the pressure of hegemonic masculinity. They are reduced to war machines, encouraged into violence rather than peace as we have seen with the Atreides, the Sardaukar and the Fremen.

In confluence with a class analysis, it is also important to remember that the Bene Gesserit are an elite. Most women in *Dune* have even less agency, as shown with Fremen women. *Dune* cannot be called a matriarchy when only a few select Bene Gesserit pull the strings while keeping the patriarchal system in place. In other words, we can indeed say that “the ideals for improvement have gone tragically amok”. (Hintz & Ostry, 2013, p.3). The Bene Gesserit and Paul's reign could

sooner be called a tyranny; ***Dune* is in fact a gendered dystopia that features aspects of a feminist utopia.** The elements revealed by this thesis support this statement by further analysing *Dune*'s political hierarchy and the Bene Gesserit's role and history. The elements we have added on masculinity, the division of labour, physical descriptions and other features outside of the Bene Gesserit also show that *Dune* is a gender dystopia. Its narrative uses ideologies such as eugenics and determinism to justify its treatment of men and women, forcing men into a violent warpath and systematically warping John's feminist utopian features into a darker, more dystopian universe where the agency of both genders is heavily compromised by political, sexual, economic and religious means.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, we have sought to study how the *Dune* universe and its narrative engaged with gender, identifying the features within its worldbuilding that shape its gender portrayal, criticising its gender ideology (Introduction, p.12). Moreover, we gathered those features to ultimately demonstrate how they make *Dune* a gender dystopia. We divided our analysis into two parts: the first focused on the performance and description of gender, while the second explored *Dune*'s political and economic history that influenced its social hierarchy.

Our analysis began with the tensions involved within stereotypical representations of gender in *Dune*; more precisely, the fear of the Other in physical descriptions and emotional representations. We established the masculine gender norm by conducting a statistical count of all the characters, analysing how *Dune*'s wider gender portrayal was impacted by this androcentric undercurrent. This was supported by uncovering *Dune*'s deterministic tendency in its gender portrayal, which relies on preconceived notions of instinct and biological determinism to justify each character's actions. For example, Jessica's pregnancy is justified both as an act of love and as a desperate instinct for furthering the Duke's bloodline in the face of a crisis. The narrative plays with the Nature versus Nurture debate but overgeneralizes the role of Nature and takes away agency from female characters, simplifying their choices as an uncontrollable feature of their sex. Each biological justification of their instinct appears in accordance with traditional gender roles: on the one hand, women feel the urge to become pregnant, turn to practical matters linked to domestic life, and must stay home and safe so that the men can more effectively fight outside. On the other hand, men have a natural predisposition for competent political leadership, driving, and fighting. Furthermore, the explanation surrounding the Bene Gesserit Plan also subscribes to deterministic conceptions of gender with its mix of several concepts: eugenics, heritability, "the needs of the race" (p.214) and the Jung-inspired concept of innate psychoanalytic gender. Under this regime, Bene Gesserit women are reduced to 'broodmares' (p.211, p.364) who exist to serve the Breeding Plan, while men are treated as an expendable resource once their genes have been seized (Duke Leto p.29 or Feyd-Rautha p. 364).

Our research then turned towards hegemonic masculinities and the political and economic system that dominates their gender performance. Using Kaufman's theory of the Triad of Male Violence, we broke down the Duke's character and his distress during a political crisis. His figure starts out as a positive example of masculinity, fatherhood and leadership, before devolving into a more violent and bitter character as described by his family. As he struggles to adhere to the hegemonic masculinity model of the Old Duke, the Duke Leto becomes unable to communicate with his entourage, while at the same time the Bene Gesserit and overall political system of *Dune* abandon him and mark him as expendable. *Dune* also shows Paul's ascension to manhood and his

own struggle to feel his emotions. As he seeks to enter Fremen culture, Paul must transition from a violent but controlled training to an uncontrollably violent lifestyle. This transition between boyhood and Fremen manhood is attained through the killing of another man, stepping into his place (getting his inheritance: objects, water wealth and his wife and children). Paul symbolically adorns a new warrior name, and just as his father before him, he is shown slowly turning into a darker, more violent person. When he makes the choice to start the Holy War, he is also compared to the Old Duke, echoing his transition.

After these first few chapters on emotional descriptions of gender, our analysis turned to physical descriptions of gender. More precisely, we applied Kristeva's theory of abjection to examine how certain characters were portrayed. The abject, we argued, was a way to describe characters who did not pass the gender performativity test and thus did not adhere to a traditional set of rules for embodying gender. For example, Count Fenring and the Baron Vladimir Harkonnen were both set apart from the average male descriptions. Fenring, because of his status as a eunuch; the Baron, because of his grotesque obesity and refusal of the martial code of honour. The abject is intimately linked with the fear of the Other—which, we previously showed, is first and foremost women. Descriptions of the Bene Gesserit oscillate between two categories: the old hag and the fetishised scheming concubines. Jessica represents the second category: she fits the physical gender norms for beauty and is generally submissive toward her Duke, but she also becomes scary when her secret Bene Gesserit motivations come to light. Paul's awakening scene in the tent illustrates that abjection and anxiety. We also added that the movie adaptation further stressed Jessica's abjection, heightening it when it comes to her Water of Life ritual and overall role in the religious brainwashing of the Fremen. It also made changes to Alia's character, lessening her abject depictions (as a talking and murdering toddler) but presenting her as a foetus capable of thought and communication, or as a fully grown person in one of Paul's visions. The fact that a Hollywood movie would tweak the abject in this manner had political implications which we made clear. We concluded by pointing out that *Dune's* story plays with the abject but ultimately restores the traditional order by repressing it: the Baron dies, and Jessica defers to her son's judgements as the Lisan al Gaib.

We then turned to the physical descriptions of the men in *Dune*, of their mechanisation. We talked about Paul's resistance to pain to test his humanity, but also as a correlating feature of masculinity. Once again, men in *Dune* are shown to evolve in very violent contexts, where almost every single male character (except the Baron and the Emperor) is a warrior. Male portrayal in *Dune* is synonymous with martial abilities; Fremen men appear even dehumanised by their conditioned enjoyment of violence and their religious fanaticism, while Sardaukar embody the concept of a war cyborg, sometimes less human and more killing machine with their weapon implants. Both Fremen and Sardaukar are conditioned by a warrior religion that uses their

masculinity model against them. Women are a part of this conditioning process, because they are used as a motivating promise, reducing them to those warriors' objects of desire. Failure to manifest this desire or defection to the warrior religion means death. This warrior religion dehumanises the men, as seen with Stilgar's character deteriorating from a good leader to a fanatic follower.

In the next chapter, we explored the division of labour in *Dune*'s societies. Responding to the previous observation that Fremen women did not participate in the fights, we showed how *Dune* took inspiration from women's roles during WWII: their role consists of sustaining economic war efforts from behind with industry and childrearing. Chani's character underwent many changes in the movie adaptation to modernise her, but also to show the division within the Fremen regarding the Prophecy so as not to portray them as a singular hivemind. Her statement that Fremen women and men are equal as well as her final moral disagreement with Paul comes as an attempt to modernise some of the book's most obvious cases of gender inequality. However, in the last chapter we showed that the book's division of labour stays very much traditional. The education given to important elites focuses on fighting and political training for boys, while Irulan receives a Bene Gesserit education that serves her to scout her father's moods and escape multiple assassination attempts. While Paul's and Feyd Rautha's educations are in many cases harsh and ruthless, Irulan's skills seem to revolve around the male figures of her life. Her main role as a scholar produced numerous works on Paul, but also her father. Once again, in the movie adaptation her character underwent changes that make her appear more like her own person and gave her more screentime. Overall, the male characters are depicted as giving much importance to the martial code of honour and political appearances, while the female characters occupy themselves with housework tasks; that is the case for Jessica's main occupations before the attack on the Atreides. Other depictions of women on Arrakis appear even more subdued, decorative and stereotypical. That is also the case for Fremen women, whose only path to some form of power is through religion with the status of Sayyadina or Reverend Mother; otherwise, their occupations concern the upkeep of the home, the children, and the production inside the sietch.

In its second part, our thesis turned to *Dune*'s political system, the historical reasons behind its rigid class divide and why it matters for its treatment of gender. Building upon our first insights on gender determinism, we have shown how the very evolution of humankind, as well as the political system of *Dune*, have shaped its society into gendered orders and political factions. We presented another of its gendered divide in terms of the historical schism between the Guild and the Bene Gesserit, in which men are in STEM-like fields and women remain attached to the body or social sciences. We put this into perspective by providing a real-life link with the gender divide in STEM and the Humanities, showing its stereotypical roots and social repercussions. This division is also in accordance with gender essentialist conceptions of cultural division of labour. We also described *Dune*'s political system, which is a patriarchal primogeniture and elective

monarchy. This patriarchal system is in fact supported by the Bene Gesserit, the only female instance that has enough power to change it, because they have chosen to pursue their goal through apparent submission. The witch-calling insults, which as we showed are historically linked to the oppression of dissident women, come as a symptom of the Bene Gesserit complacency in this patriarchal system. Another very strong symptom of *Dune*'s patriarchy is its emphasis on the social status of women as virgins, wives or concubines. The instrumentalization of sex as a political weapon has the consequence of making the narrative obsessed with men's sexuality and their marriageable status. This tendency reaches its height with Jessica's conclusion that "history will remember us as wives" rather than her focusing on her title of Duchess. Even in the Duke's absence, she builds her identity on this aspect. The importance of the status of wife is emphasised through Jessica's frustrations regarding her concubine title. When she has the opportunity to establish herself as a Duchess, Jessica prefers to disdainfully remind Irulan of her fate as a wife in a loveless marriage, reassuring Chani that she will be remembered as a wife despite her status as concubine. The trading of Irulan as a victory bride for Paul, a key to the throne condemned to live a loveless marriage, is another example of patriarchal proceedings within *Dune*. This showcases the important focus on traditional roles for women in *Dune*. Its focus on sexual ploys and female temptation, its description of sex as a weakness as well as its period-typical rejection of homosexuality illustrate another aspect of this patriarchy. The movie adaptation has made the effort to change some of those symptoms, showing modern efforts to try to subvert such problematic conceptions. Finally, we analysed the sexual violence in *Dune* and found that it was similarly linked to the patriarchal desire for the possession of a prized woman as a sign of power. However, we also showed that the men of *Dune* are also subject to homosexual and heterosexual rape (or at least coerced sexual relations for the latter), which we concluded meant that Bene Gesserit sexual control is thus dubious for both parties involved. While we showed that, in the story, rape concerns both men and women, we underlined that sexual violence inflicted on women comes with an additional layer of symbolic dominance that comes with the popular conception of 'high-born' women as objects of desire representing the possession of power. If Jessica uses her Bene Gesserit training to entice her would-be rapists to turn the situation to her advantage, that does not take away from the fact that *Dune*'s society functions on such patriarchal terms. Finally, we took the issue of nonconsensual sex and applied it to the scenes where Bene Gesserit women subjugate high-born heirs for breeding purposes. The helplessness of *Dune*'s men in the face of Bene Gesserit sexual powers elicits widespread fear, yet we saw with Lady Fenring that their pull is such that the men cannot seemingly deny them. Sexual subjugation is thus also wielded by the Bene Gesserit women, with questionable implications about consent. We used the movie's choices of adaptation with Lady Fenring's seduction scene to further reinforce this point. Finally, we brought back the subject of *Dune*'s eugenics to point out how such an ideology is a slippery slope for sexual control and violence.

Finally, we collected all of our arguments on gender and showed how they made *Dune* teeter into dystopian territory. Because of their political history and deterministic logic, *Dune*'s gender issues essentially function as dual repressors: first, through the religious and militaristic conditioning that specifically impacts the men (Sardaukar, Atreides, Harkonnen or Fremen) and relegates women to second-class citizens. Second, through the Bene Gesserit's eugenic plan, which ruthlessly uses politics and sexuality to force their will upon every single character, Bene Gesserit or not, woman or man. We showed with John's five-point utopian model that every feature that the Bene Gesserit could use for the improvement of an egalitarian feminist cause, they chose to instead control and take away the agency of humans: they educate, not to encourage free thinkers and alternative politics but to drill their members into well-behaved soldiers; they acknowledge the importance of human improvement but ultimately keep the patriarchy in place and discard some humans as inferior, or even as animals; despite their gradualist approach to change, they do not share their power, even within their own ranks; they ruthlessly use the Fremen environmental dreams to manipulate them with prophecy and keep the spice trade alive; and, finally, despite being convinced to work toward a utopian future with the Kwisatz Haderach, the Bene Gesserit do not actively improve the lives of anyone, doing rather the opposite, as we showed in our previous analyses. From both the perspectives of men and women, those points lead *Dune* into dystopian territory. While some features of *Dune*'s universe described in this thesis seem to indeed tend to a utopian future, their actual, present political impact remains dystopian. *Dune*'s message is one of caution against this dystopian result. We showed that the Bene Gesserit are heavily criticised in the story: past the usual fear and witch-calling from various male characters, Jessica and Paul both resent what the Order made of them, how much they were shaped and sacrificed by the Order for a terrible purpose. Yet, they still end up being caught in this foreseen future, using the very techniques they criticise; Jessica perpetuates the patriarchal statuses of the Landsraad while Paul uses prophecy and religious fanaticism to manipulate Fremen men. Moreover, they never truly attack the Bene Gesserit order, despite gaining indirect supremacy on them by controlling spice production. *Dune*'s rigid gender divide, its treatment of gender and the Bene Gesserit hegemony on their fates pushes this universe into dystopic territory.

Dune's thrilling and masterful universe building cannot be understated. At the time of its modern adaptation on screen, the aim of this thesis is to offer a new reading of it, to appreciate its story while keeping a critical eye—which we assert is very much the point of its narrative. Herbert wrote a story of cultural clashes, religious fanaticism and political turmoil with a flawed hero. His story is bursting with opposing forces, characters criticizing each other, cursing the political powers that force them to sacrifice everything. Issues of gender intersect with politics, economy, ecology, religion, as well as utopian and dystopian features. As a pillar of science-fiction, *Dune* asks fundamental questions by playing with the weird and the uncanny, opposing stereotypes and

revolutionary ideas on the same page. As we have shown, *Dune* also raises many concerns and deals with overarching themes that hugely impact our real life, such as fanaticism and resistance. In today's complex political climate, such an intellectually and humanely nuanced story is a priceless thing to experience and learn from.

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