

# To Fear or Not to Fear: Paul Atreides, an Accidental Hero Caught in the Hamletian Loop in Denis Villeneuve's Screen Adaptation (*Dune: Part One*, 2021) of Frank Herbert's *Dune Chronicles* (1965–1985)

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## Abstract

The story of *Dune*, as adapted for the screen by Villeneuve (2021, *Dune: Part One* [Film]), takes place in the year 10,191 (After Guild) of the Universal Standard Calendar to dramatise the imperial clash between the House of Atreides and the House of Harkonnen over the desert colony Arrakis and the control over the spice trade. Though *Dune* is an allegory that makes ecology and imperialism its chief rallying points, the thrust of this article is the central protagonist, Paul Atreides and the riddling relation he shares with his mother (his father's concubine) Lady Jessica. It attempts to portray Paul as not a Messiah or the chosen one but as a wronged, circumstantial hero who is tormented by his neurosis, daydreams and diabolical visions triggered by his repressed emotions clouding his unconscious. The article argues that Villeneuve's (2021, *Dune: Part One* [Film]) cinematic adaptation of Frank Herbert's 1965 novel *Dune* highlights the vulnerability of the Hamletian hero, who is grappling with pre-destined choices and a lack of free will, and appears frail and unheroic. Paul's actions in the drama alongside Lady Jessica and the Bene Gesserit sisterhood are an offshoot of the

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repressed emotions that play in his unconscious (often appearing as dream imagery). Paul's entry into the symbolic order is through his servility to his mother, who holds the power to language acquisition, through her use of the 'Voice'. The primary thrust of this work is to put forth a psychoanalytic reading of the character of Paul Atreides and his role as the chosen one (Lisan-Al-Gaib) in the Dune universe. Drawing on psychoanalytic theories of Freudian repression, Lacanian-postmodern theories of fragmented identity, and the ideologies behind messianism, along with the politics of language control as demonstrated in the adaptation, this work provides an in-depth analysis of the psyche of Paul Atreides through evaluation of key scenes and character moments like the Gom Jabbar test and the Voice training sequence.

### **Keywords**

Repression, Hamletian, Voice, messianism, unconscious, free will

Rolling over the sea  
You can see the spice in the air.

When Frank Herbert was working on a 1957 article about a certain foliage that could halt the progress of desert lands, little did he know that 'They Stopped the Moving Sands' would become, in a lengthier version, the next ecological cult classic. *Dune*, written in 1965 (and followed by sequels till 1985), was a retro-reflection of George Herbert that became an instant classic with the stunning array of thematic concerns, spanning different planetary spaces and covering interstellar expanses. The tale is rooted in an imperial expedition to the desert planet Arrakis for the trade of spice, which eventually ensues a rivalry between the House of Atreides and the House of Harkonnen for colonial control. The Spice Rush becomes a vanishing point for the two planetarian dynasties to outdo each other in a power struggle, leaving the oppressed natives (Fremen) no choice but to rebel. If Herbert's classic is about the anxieties surrounding imperial rule, native subordination, trade wars and ecological disaster, this research attempts to broach a less hyped subject: the role of Paul Atreides as an accidental Messiah, and his relational dynamics with his mother, Lady Jessica, and the Bene Gesserit sisterhood. This research study, though acknowledging the political subtext and the environmental discourse, attempts to throw light on the central protagonist, Paul Atreides, whose status as a flawed hero against the backdrop of an alarming rise of messianism is highlighted. Treating the adaptation as a Hamlet-esque allegory, this article bases its argument on the complex relation that Paul Atreides shares with his mother, the concubine of Duke Leto, Lady Jessica. Similar to the Shakespearean tragic hero, Paul is internally rifted by the schism between his moral duty as a son whose father has been recently assassinated and the dilemma to replace him. Paul crumbles under the pressure of performance as the Bene Gesserit sisterhood and his own mother forcefully assign him his fate by declaring him the Messiah. Paul Atreides, in this study, is represented as someone with similar Hamletian traits, suffering from inaction, inertia and lack of resolve triggered by his repressed emotions in the unconscious that find an escape route

through his visions. This study argues that the cinematic adaptation represents the coming-of-age tale of a young Paul Atreides whose tryst with heroism is a seeming manipulation of a pre-destined arrangement that imposes a crown and subjects him, a boy still grappling with his philosophical doubts and suppressed instincts. Robbed of any agential power, it appears as if Paul is a mere figurehead; a chosen hero acting on the promptings of his mother, Lady Jessica, and the Bene Gesserit sisterhood. Paul's intricate relation with his mother, Lady Jessica, is founded on the manipulations and eugenic schemes of the Bene Gesserit sisterhood to which Lady Jessica belongs. The sisterhood is a religious cult cum biological manipulator that appoints Paul Atreides as Kwisatz Haderach (a male Bene Gesserit) to assume messianic properties in the race to control the spice trade in Arrakis. Paul serves as a dramatic prop, an incidental hero who is merely caught up in the events leading to his fate as the chosen one. Thus, the intent of this article is to provide a psychoanalytic reading of the ambivalent relation between Lady Jessica and Paul Atreides against the context of his circumstantial role as the Messiah.

'I serve only one master, his name is Shai-Hulud'.

This emphatic confession by ecologist Dr Leit Kynes of the desert planet Arrakis sums up the spectacular role spice plays; it is that hallucinogenic that causes altered states, bends the mind, stretches consciousness, expands life and facilitates space travel. Herbert's well-grounded research on sand dunes resulted in a post-colonial science fiction that borders on powerful thematic concerns around ecology, imperialism and power. Moreover, a sharp undercurrent of the power struggle between male and female seems to propel the dramatic action forward. The sisterhood of Bene Gesserit is clearly implicated in the ideological scheme of eugenics and the selective breeding of female heirs to win dynastic wars. However, Lady Jessica incurred the wrath of the sisterhood in manipulating the bloodline to bear a male heir. Consequently, she was scorned by the Reverend Mother, who mourned the loss and waste of power in a male agent, Paul Atreides. Paul thus becomes the circumstantial Messiah who is chosen to act as a foil against the onslaught of imperialists in controlling the spice trade and in ruling the Dune universe and the native Fremen. After the sudden assassination of his father, Duke Leto Atreides, Paul realised that the Bene Gesserit sisterhood and his mother navigated the politics of the Imperium from the shadows. To achieve their goal, the Reverend Mother and Lady Jessica tutored Paul for a future Messiah-ship through mind and Voice control. Interestingly, the specific scene set in the breakfast parlour where Lady Jessica struggles to train Paul on Voice command is an improvised addition to the George Herbert classic. Therefore, Paul Atreides follows a pre-destined trajectory of succeeding his father to control the outer space and spice set up by the conspiratorial designs of his mother through the Bene Gesserit sisterhood. Part of the argument of this study is grounded on Freudian analysis of the Hamlet-like mental conflict that Paul experiences in his difficult relationship with his mother, Lady Jessica. A key idea in Freudian psychoanalysis is the deployment of defence mechanisms. Ego defence mechanisms shield the subconscious from hurtful feelings or thoughts. It represses internal conflicts and can often lead to evading uncomfortable realities. There are many categories of defence mechanisms like repression, denial, projection and sublimation. Freudian

repression theory is integral to psychoanalysis, and it suggests that the ego unwittingly drives dangerous thoughts, memories and desires out of conscious awareness into the unconscious to avoid distress. The theory was proposed first by Sigmund Freud in the late 19th century, in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), co-authored with Josef Breuer. Boag (2006), in his *Freudian Repression, the Common View, and Pathological Science*, elaborates on the concept of repression as coined by Sigmund Freud;

The term ‘repressed’ (verdrängt) appears for the first time in Breuer and Freud’s Preliminary Communication (1893, in Breuer & Freud, 1895). Here, ‘traumatic’ memories are inaccessible due to motivated forgetting: ...it was a question of things which the patient wished to forget, and therefore intentionally repressed from his conscious thought and inhibited and suppressed. (Breuer & Freud, 1895, p. 10)

Repression here is defensive, a ‘fending off’ preventing ‘incompatible ideas’ that arouse displeasure (such as shame, self-reproach or psychical pain) from association with conscious thinking (Freud, in Breuer & Freud, 1895, p. 157) (Boag, 2006, p. 75). Sari et al. (2023), in their joint work *Exploring Freudian Defense Mechanism Theory in the Portrayal of Paul Atreides in the Movie Dune* selects the Gom Jabbar scene as an example of potential repression. The authors point out how,

Paul undergoes severe pain in the Gom Jabbar test as his hand is placed inside a box and a poisoned needle is placed close to his neck by Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam. The purpose of the test is to evaluate someone’s ability to restrain their emotions and instincts. His reaction to the pain could be interpreted as a representation of Paul’s internal struggles associated with his uncertain future. The scene may imply that Paul hides his agony and fear to some extent in an effort to show that he has emotional control in the face of a potentially fatal circumstance. (Sari et al., 2003, p. 322)

Sari et al. (2023) further state:

Paul’s experiences with trauma, such as the disruption of his family’s history and the discovery of his prophetic gifts, illustrate repression. He conceals painful memories and desires, which expose a complicated internal battle that influences his choices and actions throughout the story. In addition to suppressing memories, Paul Atreides demonstrates repression through a complex emotional journey. His battle with the weight of fate and heritage generates a psychological environment in which repression functions as an essential coping mechanism for traumatic events. Paul struggles with opposing wants and moral dilemmas in addition to repressing memories; this is a complex form of repression. His attempts to repress these contradictory feelings and goals are consistent with Freudian theory, which holds that repression involves a wider range of psychological substances than just forgetting memories. To add, the way Paul’s inner world is shown in the film—through dream sequences, visions and reflective moments—provides a window into the depths of his repression. (Sari et al., 2023, p. 324)

Parkerson (1998), in his *Semantics, General Semantics and Ecology in George Herbert’s Dune*, draws attention to Herbert’s decision to examine the

messianic superhero against an ecological backdrop as no accident. Herbert's own words can testify to his intense aversion to the dogmatic roles such propagandists play:

I had already written several pieces about ecological matters, but my superhero concept filled me with a concern that ecology might be the next banner for demagogues and would-be heroes, for the power seekers and others ready to find an 'adrenaline high' in the launching of a new crusade. I could begin to see the shape of a global problem, no part of it separated from any other- social ecology, political ecology, economic ecology. (*Dune Genesis*, p. 74)

Parkerson (1998) points out how Herbert's belief in a specific language of an ecosystem produced *Dune* that 'explores the wielding of political, economic and military power, and, by incorporating aspects of general semantics, their common thread: the power of language' (p. 404). He further mentions:

The importance of general semantics in *Dune* must be addressed for two reasons. First, it emphasised the importance of language and other cultural givens in providing a fundamental, unconscious structure for human thought and behaviour; and second, it insisted it was possible to train human beings into new semantic habits and an orientation toward first-order experience. (Parkerson, 1998, p. 405)

The role of Semantics is a constant ploy in *Dune*, specifically in the operation of the Bene Gesserit school. The school set up for the mental training of females runs a programme of eugenics through which it produces the perfect clone, genetically engineered to embody superhuman mental powers dubbed the Kwisatz Haderach (one who can be in many places at once). In order to fulfil their agenda, the Bene Gesserit sisterhood deploys the power of non-verbal communication, particularly 'gestures' that function like a strange but effective 'mind-speak'. In the cinematic adaptation of *Dune: Part One* (2021), Villeneuve demonstrates the representational power of gestures in the quietly combative scene between Paul and the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam, in the presence of Lady Jessica. The entire scene takes place practically through the frugality of semantics, non-verbal speech and gestures that communicate the sceptical position Paul holds in reference to the powerful sisterhood and how his cautious and controlled respect for the Reverend Mother springs from his reluctant bond with his own mother, Lady Jessica. This unnatural bond becomes more explicit when, after the first training by the secret sisterhood, Paul lashed out at Lady Jessica about his mental equilibrium, 'They have turned me into a freak! (*Dune: Part One*, 2021)'.

Paul is also subjected to a regime of subservience through the use of the Voice; different intonations of the Voice by the user command the follower to obey instructions. The Voice is persistently used by both the Bene Gesserit sisterhood and Lady Jessica to train and control Paul. Lady Jessica's superiority springs from her ability to critically analyse and deploy the semantics of control (the Voice) through which she not only dominates Paul but also potential enemies encountered from the Imperium and the Fremen. Eventually, it is through Lady Jessica's

use of this semantics of power that she wins the fidelity of the Fremens for whom 'the mother (Jessica) and the son (Paul) are both the chosen one'.

In *Voice Lessons: The Seductive Appeal of Vocal Control* in Frank Herbert's *Dune*, Mack (2011) defines the Voice as:

The meticulous adjustment of personal vocal tones to mirror a target's own. Performed correctly, the Voice results in a frighteningly irresistible mental suggestion directed toward a hapless pawn. By assuming a voice uniquely keyed to each of her victims, then, a Bene Gesserit can almost unnoticeably bend the willpower of other characters in the novel by merely speaking to them. (Mack, 2011, p. 39)

Mack (2011) further observes, 'By constructing the Voice as a dimension of communication beyond signification, as an inherently feminine or motherly trait, and as a unique bond between self and other, Herbert taps into aspects of the Voice that haunt contemporary speaking subjects' (p. 41). It is evident then that the tool of para-linguistics (and the Voice) helps the Bene Gesserit sisterhood to not only monitor their own space and identify their friends and enemies through examination of speech patterns, but also to utilise it as a weapon of mind-control.

Encountering the M-Other: Mother as the abject.  
'Dreams are messages from the deep'

When Jacques Lacan revised certain Freudian premises of modern psychoanalysis (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2022), he stirred a whirlwind of new ideas ('The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', delivered in 1949 at the IPA conference in Zurich and later included in his *Ecrits*, 1966). The subject in psychoanalytic studies evolved through three different phases, the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real, according to Jacques Lacan. The imaginary order (the mirror stage) is that in which the subject is obsessed with one's image, almost in a narcissistic fashion (but it is just an imaginary version of the self). Seeing oneself as a composite whole is the pre-emptive of this phase, the ego is not divided into an *I* and *me*, hence there is no acknowledgement of the Other. Before the tragic assassination of Paul's father, Duke Leto Atreides, young Paul functioned almost as a boy, imagining his position as independent from his mother and defined by his extreme proximity with his father; however, when Lady Jessica (and the Bene Gesserit) intervened to discipline and train Paul through mental semantics and the Voice that young Paul enters the symbolic order of language acquisition. Lacan's symbolic order is the phase when the subject enters the normative world of social action through accessing language and accepting the authority of the father (the law of the father) becomes imminent for the subject at this point. This study points out how a psychoanalytic reading of the character of Paul Atreides takes us to his entry into the symbolic order, where, through the acquisition of semantics, Paul accedes to the authority of the mother instead of the father. Lady Jessica and the Bene Gesserit sisterhood train Paul to accept the dominance of the mother and fit into the leadership role (as the chosen

one) imposed on him by the pre-fabricated circumstances in which he is placed. If the symbolic order is more about the unconscious (structured like a language, according to Lacanian dictum), Paul's attainment of the symbolic order also reveals the dark crevices of his unconscious, exemplified by the (latent) repressed emotions he experiences and the visitations of prophetic visions and complex dreams that become prominent during this period. The real order, according to Lacan, is bound with the mother, a site of total identification which gets disrupted by the subject's entry into the socio-linguistic structure: the symbolic phase that severs the real. The symbolic order in the terminology of Jacques Lacan, is therefore that penultimate peak where one encounters the M-Other through language. If the imaginary stage is the pre-linguistic and pre-oedipal stage, it is the symbolic order that ushers the subject into the idea of difference; the idea that linguistic signs are constituted by difference (absence/lack), and that likewise identities are constituted by sexual difference. Therefore, if language is operational through lack or difference, it brings the subject to the notion of desire for a lost (absent) object, in the cinematic adaptation of *Dune: Part One* (2021), Paul Atreides eventually succumbs to the restrained emotions of his unconscious (return of the repressed) harboured against Lady Jessica as he gradually acquires the power of language (marks Paul's entry into the symbolic order: the authority of the Mother). One of the earliest scenes of tutelage appears in the onscreen adaptation where Lady Jessica instructs Paul 'to use the Voice' for simple commands. At this point, Lady Jessica's interrogation regarding Paul's dreams (She asks, 'More dreams?') leads us to a strange twist when Paul answers in the negative. The antagonism, scepticism and mistrust that Paul felt for Lady Jessica become evident in a later scene where Paul shares his dreams (the unconscious) instead with his uncle Duncan Idaho.

Paul: I have been having dreams, I saw you lying dead, fallen in battle...

Duncan: Dreams make good stories, but everything important happens when we are awake.

With the gradual mastery of the Voice, Paul himself comes to acknowledge 'the Other' through his unconscious (also his dreams). During his interaction with the Reverend Mother Helen Mohiam, Paul also encounters his own sense of abject (here Fear) for the M-other manifested through the desire to master and use the Voice against the Bene Gesserit sisterhood whose commands he wants to resist. Let us examine the terse repartee that takes place between Paul and the Reverend Mother. When the Reverend Mother commands Paul to kneel before her, the underlying power struggle comes to the fore.

Paul: How dare you use the Voice on me?

Reverend Mother: Your mother bade you obey me.

In *Voice Lessons: The Seductive Appeal of Vocal Control* in Frank Herbert's *Dune*, Mack (2011) clearly outlines how:

Herbert structures the Voice as the Bene Gesserit's direct access to another character's subconscious. A victim of the Voice cannot easily resist a stylised command because they understand the directive as incorporating aspects of his/her own Voice, a twisted form of persuasive self-talk (Mack, 2011, p. 44). It is then followed by a pain test that Paul successfully passes, and earns recognition of his inner prowess by the Reverend Mother herself: 'If you had been unable to control your impulses like an animal, we could not let you live'. The control of impulses points to how neatly structured Paul's unconscious is during this phase, unlike the Id in psychoanalytic thinking, this zone of repressed desires uncovered through the unconscious acts like the superego, perfected by the use of semantics (the Voice and other non-verbal cues and gestures) as Paul initiates his rites on entering the symbolic order. Again, there is a mention of his dreams.

Reverend Mother: Tell me about these dreams.

Paul: I had one tonight.

Reverend Mother: What did you see?

Paul: A girl. On Arrakis.

Reverend Mother: Have you dreamt of her before?

Paul: Many times.

Reverend Mother: Do you often dream things that happen just as you dream them?

Paul: Not exactly.

Paul Atreides is slowly invoked into the symbolic order through accession to specific semantics tutored by his mother, whom he finally wishes to replace in order to function as the chosen one. After the untimely assassination of Duke Leto Atreides, Paul is circumstantially chosen as the deliverer of political catharsis. The preparation of a hero was part of the nefarious design of the Bene Gesserit sisterhood; the only difference is that they usually bred only females, and Paul was a male. When Lady Jessica confesses that the Bene Gesserit sisterhood has existed for thousands of years, 'has crossed bloodlines to bring forth the One', Paul realises that it is 'All part of a plan'; and that his pre-destined career has been carefully appointed through 'selective breeding'. Reacting to the chant of 'Lisan-Al-Gaib' by the native Fremen, Lady Jessica tells Paul that 'These people have been waiting for centuries for Lisan-Al-Gaib—now they see Paul and see the signs ... The Bene Gesserit school has been preparing the way', to which Paul retorts, 'Or actually planting superstitions ... They see what they have been told to see'. This makes him a provisional hero.

Paul is forced to follow the dictates of the Mother; the law of the Mother is the high semantics: the use of the Voice, gestures, haptics and kinesics of sign language through which he is sworn into the symbolic order. Inheriting the socio-linguistics of the mother (the gestures and sign language used before the Bene Gesserit to display reverence and respect, the sign language used when met with authoritarian subversion and opposition, for example, talking in codes among spies and enemies like the Harkonnen assassins and the Fremen warriors) is the unique legacy of Paul Atreides. Later on, when a Fremen woman named Shadout

Mapes greets Lady Jessica as the ‘Lisan-Al-Gaib—the Mother and the Son as one’, it appears that the sense of abject seems to spring from Paul’s own self, and is directed against his M-Other, both hailed together as the One by the Fremmen. Paul’s abject springs from his repressed emotions in the unconscious and manifests itself in the Fear for the Other, the other which is both internalised as an alterity in the unconscious as well as externalised in the figure of the M-Other (Lady Jessica). Paul’s translocation from the imaginary order to the symbolic order occurs precisely when he encounters his mother (as the other) through accepting the normative world of semantics that Lady Jessica disciplines him in. That pedagogy is the starting point of his confronting the other. Mack (2011) notes, ‘Paul’s subjectivity is guaranteed and sustained through Jessica’s Voice, but the inescapable, sonic link to his mother paradoxically threatens the very sense of self it constructs’ (p. 50). Mack further notes that ‘the Voice complicates the typically clear division between interior self and exterior Other and is used to support a stifling biological determinism in *Dune*’ (p. 51). On the other hand, ‘Jessica feels no anxiety toward the Other at the base of her Voice because its very presence ultimately allows her to command the Other’ (Mack, 2011, p. 56). This phase is densely scattered with hallucinations, dreams and visions that underlie repressed emotions in the unconscious. Paul shares with Lady Jessica one such vision that he is constantly visited by (the initial reluctance to share his dreams with Lady Jessica gradually disappears as Paul becomes subjected to the law of the Mother in the symbolic order).

Paul: It was confusing, I thought I saw my death. Only it was not. I know a knife is important somehow. Someone will hand me a blade. But I do not know who or when or where. Some things, though, are crystal clear. I can feel it. I know you are pregnant.

Lady Jessica: You cannot know that. I barely know it.

In this apocalyptic vision Paul sees a Fremmen native woman called Chani who seduces him to finally draw out her secret weapon (a crysknife) with the intent of murder, but the vision is fragmented and Paul is left with a certain doubleness of the vision that leaves him confused between the mysterious woman Chani and his own mother Lady Jessica (as the prophetic dream/s overlap with reality). Let us define what *abject* signifies according to its proponent, Kristeva (1982), in her monumental work, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980). As proposed by her, abjection is connected with an unfavourable reaction such as disgust, revulsion or horror caused by confrontation with an object that attempts to break down the division between self and the other (or subject and object in Lacanian terms). Thus, to be in a state of abjection is to feel disgust when faced by objects that menace to cross (or do cross) the limit/boundary. This leads to a collapse of signification, which results in the emotion of repugnance and revolt. Kristeva (1982) suggests that the prime object of abjection, the child, must decline the mother to become a sovereign subject. Yet, the mother lingers on the bound/limit/margin, making her both coveted and repulsive, as the ‘violent, visceral reaction of horror and disgust—the

“retching”—experienced when confronting the breakdown of boundaries between self and other, or subject and object...The abject would thus be the “object” of primal repression’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 12). When Paul visualises his own death (It was confusing, I thought I saw my death), it is nothing but his abject (tied to his dormant thoughts in the unconscious) manifested through his prophetic visions, including one providing the spectacle of his own death. Significantly, another crucial site of abjection (highlighted here through death) according to Kristeva (1982) is the corpse, which, along with the maternal body, is an equal source of revulsion and horror.

Paul’s final vision is that of the Great War, one that decides the fate of the Dune universe. But fear seems to be a common denominator.

Paul: That’s the future. It is coming.

Lady Jessica: Paul, you are scared. I can see it. Tell me please, what do you fear?

Paul: Somebody help me, please. I see a holy war spreading the universe like an unquenchable fire. A war in my name...

Lady Jessica: You are your father’s son. You are my son. You are Duke Paul Atreides. You know who you are.

Paul: Get off me—You did this to me. Your Bene Gesserit made me a freak!

To borrow a thought in this context from Mack’s (2011) *Voice Lessons: The Seductive Appeal of Vocal Control* in Frank Herbert’s *Dune*:

As if drawing directly from Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic, Herbert constructs the Voice in *Dune* as a quality unique to women and motherhood... In this way, the taught Voice becomes a crucial link between Jessica and Paul, between mother and child, within the narrative. Jessica’s training, of which the Voice is a central aspect, functions like the maternal chora to structure Paul’s subjectivity. (Mack, 2011, p. 48)

That the Bene Gesserit sisterhood and his own mother used the Voice for subordination and control remained a constant source of turmoil for Paul in his journey of initiation and maturation. Paul Atreides and his hostile relationship with his M-Other is the key highlight of this study; using analogies from psychoanalytic studies, it attempts to argue how young Paul is introduced into the symbolic order through the power of language. Under Lady Jessica’s tutelage, Paul is colonised into a certain role-playing, his destiny is manufactured, and his training is completed only with the use of semantics. As in any colonial encounter, the key to hegemony is language; this cinematic adaptation makes it evident how the foreignness of language is translated into subservience and control through its users, for example, the Voice, which uses intonations to command and order. During this coming-of-age phase, Paul’s Hamletian dilemma shifts between this rare sense of trust and proximity with his mother, while on other occasions, a kind of mistrust and rivalry with her, instead of replacing the father, Paul eventually desires to replace the mother to assume supreme leadership (as the One).

Beware of heroes, much better rely on your own judgement, and your own mistakes: Paul Atreides, a false prophet?

The above reflection comes from the author George Herbert himself, whose philosophy behind the conception of the *Dune Chronicles* was the very menace of demagoguery. Though Herbert's work created a lot of stir for its orientalist assumptions, romanticising the Arab world and its Islamist traditions was actually a well-researched project for the author. The real agenda of Herbert's *Dune* was directed against the threatening emergence of false leadership surrounding the environmental crisis. The *Dune*, as a science fiction cocoon at its core a blatant political commentary. Much of Paul's ascent is at odds with democratic rule; thus, the adaptation is largely founded on questioning of leadership and authority. In his work, *The Law of Frank Herbert's Dune: Legal Culture between Cynicism, Earnestness and Futility* Baade (2023) opines, '*Dune* reflects a profound distrust of organised authority. Ultimately, it undervalues the fact that law can serve to prevent abuse of power. But to do so, the law needs independent guardians which are conspicuously absent in *Dune*' (p. 247).

Zamfir (2024), in his *Identity, Politics, and the Postmodern Hero in Frank Herbert's Dune and Dune Messiah*, states that Paul's 'journey reveals the fragility of identity and the limitations of agency. Through the lens of Lacan's theoretical framework, Paul's shifting roles underscore the alienation inherent in constructing an identity shaped by collective fantasy and systemic forces' (p. 32). This research study argues that Paul Atreides is an accidental hero; his future destiny as the chosen one is engineered to serve the interests of the Bene Gesserit sisterhood and his mother, Lady Jessica. Paul has hardly any free will, and his trajectory to the leadership of the *Dune* universe is constructed through gradual disciplining and training under his mother, Lady Jessica, a sister of the Bene Gesserit sisterhood, one complicit with the same political scheme. Zamfir (2024) further elaborates:

Both Herbert's fictional universe and the modern political landscape reveal how systemic crises, cultural grief and collective fantasies converge to produce figures who embody the hopes and fears of the people. Both Paul and modern populist leaders are products of systemic distrust. Paul benefits from a pre-existing web of religious myths, while populist leaders thrive in environments where distrust in political institutions is at an all-time high ... In postmodern fashion, Paul Atreides can be interpreted as a decentred subject. Even though he is the protagonist of the story and thus the focal point of *Dune*, he is powerless against his own 'heroic' abilities. His prescient abilities—the way in which he dreams about the future and the multitude of outcomes that can alter and shape not only his fate but the fate of millions of people around him—make him powerless against the grander sociopolitical landscape that he inhabits. Paul's journey reveals the paradoxical nature of knowledge, as pre-established notions of the future become methods of imprisonment. (Zamfir, 2024, p. 33)

In this particular context, Paul's intentions are conflicted, which resulted in the total fragmentation and alienation of his self. To borrow another observation from Zamfir (2024):

Paul's prescience dismantles the illusion of autonomy. Unlike the traditional hero who exercises free will to shape their destiny and even the world around him, Paul's journey is marked by the collapse of certainty. The world is shaping Paul Atrides even before his birth. Everything that has happened in the world and at the time Paul was a member of the world of *Dune* already established how the protagonist was going to act and how his identity would become. His foresight does not liberate him but instead entraps him within a deterministic universe governed by the intersecting systems of the Bene Gesserit's breeding program, the Fremen's religious mythology, and the ecological significance of spice production on Arrakis... Through Paul's journey, Herbert crafts a narrative that reveals the fracturing of identity and the traumatic consequences of fulfilling roles imposed by cultural, religious, and political systems. (Zamfir, 2024, p. 34)

This study provides the psychoanalytic vantage point from where the character of Paul Atrides is examined; the evaluation exposes the dark crevices of his unconscious where the repressed finds its way through the spectacular visions of doom and apocalypse that the young duke is visited by. As Lisan-Al-Gaib, Paul serves not only as a project for the Bene Gesserit or his own mother, but also for the Fremen, whose communal fantasy of emancipation attempts to find its fruition through him as some sort of a coping mechanism. The Lacanian concept of desire can also illuminate Paul's inner turmoil and his predicament. As Zamfir (2024) points out:

The role of fantasy is a crucial aspect of Lacanian theory, particularly in understanding how individuals navigate the complexities of desire and subjectivity. Fantasy serves as a crucial mechanism through which individuals attempt to manage the inherent tensions and contradictions of the human condition, including the encounter with the Real and the pursuit of the objet petit a. Thus, fantasy, according to Lacan, serves as a mechanism to mediate the tensions between the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. It provides a framework through which individuals attempt to manage their desires and make sense of their place in the world. However, this fantasy ultimately collapses under the weight of the Real, exposing the void that underlies their constructed identities. The Real is not the void that lies at the bottom of the unconscious, it is the realization that there may be nothing there to begin with, thus the impossibility of crafting a narrative surrounding an individual or a nation... For the Fremen, Paul embodies their collective fantasy of liberation – a figure who symbolizes their resistance to the Harkonnens and the one who 'would point the way' to a paradise, forever altering the planet they inhabit. However, this fantasy ultimately collapses under the weight of its contradictions. (Zamfir, 2024, p. 37)

Herbert himself provides a critique of messianism through the shifting identities, fragmented selfhood and dismantled agency of Paul Atrides while chronicling the *Dune* saga (and it finds a similar treatment in the cinematic adaptation as well). To consolidate Herbert's worldview, let me include a reflection from Monfared (2024) from his research article *The Vicious Cycle of Colonization in the Cinematic Adaptations of Dune*:

It is worth noting that it is an outsider that has been portrayed as the awaited Messiah; therefore, a colonizer, or a possible oppressor, has been endowed with divine power by the colonial discourse as a means of granting him the permission to do whatever he wants. (Monfared, 2024, p. 159)

To carry forward the same line of argument, in *The Messiah and the Greens: The Shape of Environmental Action in Dune and Pacific Edge*, Stratton (2001) states that Paul Atreides is the most ‘ambivalent hero of Science Fiction and the source of his tragic nature is in “his awareness of the inevitability of his role”’ (p. 308).

Paul’s entry into the symbolic order, where his preparation for leadership (his role as Messiah) is initiated under the aegis of his mother, Lady Jessica, and her linguistic training, resonates accurately with Lacan’s theoretical proposition about the symbolic, the real and the idea of desire. In this context, Ghoshal (2025) in his *The Silence of the Colonized Cosmos: Trauma and Epistemic Resistance in Frank Herbert’s Dune and Denis Villeneuve’s Cinematic Adaptations* observes, ‘The hero Paul Atreides enters this masterfully crafted universe of calculated sound and intentioned silence as a character who is himself the quintessential contradictions of the colonial experience—both occupier and occupied, colonizer and colonized, savior and destroyer’ (p. 126). Though the authority of the mother is initially intimidating for the son, eventually Paul discovers the absence/lack/difference as an element of abject and alterity in his own self. This encounter with the M-Other helps him acknowledge his own contentious relation with Lady Jessica. Hence, the object of abject oscillates between his own self and the M-Other. At the peak of this apogee, Paul overcomes his Hamletian dilemma to feel the desire to replace his mother (both claimed as the chosen one, but only one is destined to succeed). As an incidental hero/Messiah whose fate is cosmetically designed, Paul Atreides is thus a figure polarised by opposing claims, causing his Hamletian stance.

Let us conclude with yet another minor but intriguing aspect of Paul’s character (as the chosen one) which is his weird ‘trans-ness’, his access to female consciousness (due to his proximity and training with Bene Gesserit sisterhood and his own mother) that makes him a liminal, hybrid figure, queerly positioned between the gender binary, but this again, is a different subject and falls outside the argument of this research study.

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