“Bless the Maker and His Water”: *Dune* as a Cautionary Tale

Aaron Williams

With Denis Villeneuve's recent adaptation of *Dune*, Frank Herbert’s novel has reentered the cultural zeitgeist as a foundational work of science fiction. Aside from boasting an extensive universe and a visually compelling hero’s journey, *Dune* is also philosophically dense, containing competing ideologies that drive the book’s core conflicts. Since its release in 1965, some of the book’s ideologies have matured from nascent thoughts to realized philosophical schools. The primary focus of this paper is Fremen societal philosophy and how its ecocentrism aligns with modern posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism. By using Rosi Braidotti’s framework on the posthuman predicament and posthuman subjectivity, the Fremen’s ideologies can be recontextualized for today’s readers, positioning *Dune* as a cautionary tale that reveals how philosophies can become instruments of manipulation.

Dune follows Paul Atreides, a young noble destined for ultimate power, as he evolves from a perceptive prince into a messianic tyrant. It details his family's arrival and eventual downfall on Arrakis, a strategically vital planet that controls a universally essential resource known as spice. Throughout the novel, Paul becomes increasingly involved with the local population, the ecologically minded and anti-colonial Fremen, ultimately assuming the position of their messiah to wage war on the colonizer state that

controls Arrakis. However, Paul's motives remain ambiguous. Despite his supernatural foresight and the third-person limited narrative focusing on him, the novel shows him to be influenced by conflicting destinies and political ideologies, leading him to make a self-serving political choice at the novel's climax.

The circumstances of Arrakis and its native Fremen mirror the "crisis of the Anthropocene," as Rosi Braidotti calls it. Braidotti identifies capitalism as a clear driver of this crisis, highlighting how it dispossesses groups of humans necessary for its sustainability. She writes, "the biogenetic structure of contemporary capitalism enhances the ability to generate profits from the scientific and economic comprehension of all that lives... Thus, the greenhouses may look like moon stations, but their produce is mostly picked by unregistered migrants who move from one site to another during the harvest season, constituting the proletariat of today – economic fodder vulnerable to widespread vilification and xenophobic rejection" (Braidotti 11). Similarly, the planet Arrakis and the Fremen are treated as economic resources for the Imperium, their role in spice production taking precedence over their humanity. Under this obligation, the Fremen are dispossessed and vilified as well; the Baron, a former ruler of Arrakis, thinks to himself, "we're the ones who tamed Arrakis... except for the few mongrel Fremen hiding in the skirts of the desert... and some tame smugglers bound to the planet almost as tightly as the native labor pool" (Herbert 26). This thought signifies both the dehumanization of the Fremen through anti-Fremen rhetoric and the incessant desire for capital success through fear of smugglers.

The Fremen, as seen in the novel, operate on an ecologically centered philosophy that reflects humanity's responsibilities during the posthuman predicament. Before the Atreides' arrival on Arrakis, the Fremen are led by an ecologist, also referred to as a "planetologist," named Dr. Liet Kynes, who "speaks for all Fremen" (Herbert 359-60). Their choice of an ecologist as leader is significant, and Kynes' ecological insight is made clearer in his comments. During an encounter with the Atreides clan leaders, Kynes says that "Arrakis could be an Eden if its rulers would look up from grubbing for spice" (Herbert 144). Brief though it is, this statement rejects the capital-driven imperial project in favor of human obligations to improve their planet, a theme Kynes expands on in a later manifesto-like speech during his death. This sentiment is rearticulated by Braidotti in her lecture "Memoirs of a Posthumanist," where she describes how the "crisis of the Anthropocene" is partly caused by "the exacerbation of economic and social inequalities," specifying that "seeds, cells, plants, animals, and bacteria fit into this logic of commodification alongside various specimens of humanity, producing a functional form of post-anthropocentrism that spuriously unifies all species under the imperative of the market economy" (Braidotti 9, 12). Kynes, when lamenting how the rulers of his planet "grub for spice," describes the same logic of commodification that Braidotti mentions, noting that Arrakis has only the abstract capital needs of other subjects to serve.

Arrakis' species are unified in capital-induced post-anthropocentrism. The planet's primary crop is spice, produced by *Dune's* iconic sandworms (Herbert 148). In the eyes of the colonial rulers of the planet, since sandworms are the apex predator of Arrakis, their ecosystem funnels entirely into the production of spice, reducing the ecological process to a capital-driven end. However, post-anthropocentrism also appears in Fremen culture as a shared cultural value. Braidotti defines her post-anthropocentric approach as "not Man, but a new collective subject, a 'we-are-in-this-together' kind of subject," which argues for all terrestrials to be protected under the same ethical code (Braidotti 15). The Fremen effectively practice this code, as they value all of Arrakis' species as part of their planetary culture. Kynes reveals this attribute of Fremen philosophy when watching a sandworm devour a spice harvester, murmuring to himself, "Bless the Maker and His water... Bless the coming and going of Him. May His passage cleanse the world. May He keep the world for His people" (Herbert 157). The sandworm referred to here as "the Maker" is deified by the Fremen, who view themselves as "His people." It is also revealing how this direct confrontation between a natural being and the colonial project is regarded as "cleansing" by the Fremen leader. This animal deification reappears, albeit more obliquely than the explicit ritual litany from Kynes. Paul, when choosing his familiar Fremen name, asks for the Chakobsa word for "the little mouse, the mouse that jumps," to which Stilgar, Paul's Fremen leader, replies, "we call that one muad'dib" (Herbert 388-9). Paul ascends to messianic status among the Fremen as the novel progresses, and his familiar name, "Muad'dib," becomes the war cry for his soldiers: "wild legions would charge into battle screaming their war cry: 'Muad'dib!'" (Herbert 402). Through this shared cultural value, all species on Arrakis are united within Fremen culture, with some species even surpassing humanity in significance, forming a society aimed at improving Arrakis for all its inhabitants

Herbert reveals remarkable insights into Fremen ecological philosophy during Kynes' death scene. After being abandoned in the desert to die by the enemy Harkonnens, Kynes hallucinates a conversation with his father Pardot, the previous Fremen leader and fellow ecologist, that articulates the key elements of an ecologically literate government. Again, offering a rejection of capitalism, Kynes thinks to himself, "the real wealth of a planet is in its landscape" (Herbert 345). As stated earlier, Braidotti writes from the perspective of an earthling under constant existential threat due to climate change, something she refers to as "the crisis of the Anthropocene." To address this threat, she calls for her audience to "inscribe contemporary subjects in the conditions of their present predicament"—that is, the climate crisis— "in order to transform it affirmatively" and include all life (Braidotti 27). The proliferation of ecological philosophy is represented in the Kynes hallucination when Pardot says to him, "you must cultivate ecological literacy among the people" (Herbert 367). However, in *Dune* "ecological literacy," as Joshua Pearson argues in his essay "Frank Herbert's Dune and the Financialization of Heroic Masculinity," "is a tool for grasping and exploiting chaos to enforce one's chosen patterns" (162). This notion of philosophical proliferation in Pardot Kynes' vision underscores how philosophy itself can become a means to attain power.

Donna Haraway notes that “the doings of situated actual human beings matter… Like it or not, we are in the string figure game of caring for and with precarious worldlings made terribly more precarious by fossil-burning man making new fossils as rapidly as possible in the orgies of the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene” (Haraway 157). Both Braidotti and Haraway recognize that human influence is still principal and that it should be collectively focused on the betterment of the native planet. This idea resonates in Kynes’ father’s statement that, “to the working planetologist, his most valuable tool is human beings… We must use man as a constructive ecological force – inserting adapted terraform life: a plant here, an animal there, a man in that place – to transform the water cycle, to build a new kind of landscape” (Herbert 347-8). Kynes’ father then explains how to rally the population around his ecological vision, describing that “religion and law among our masses must be the same… An act of disobedience must be a sin and require religious penalties. This will have the dual benefit of bringing both greater obedience and greater bravery” (Herbert 350). However, it is this radical galvanization around an ideology that allows Paul to appropriate it for what Joshua Pearson calls his own “cynical Imperial project” (Pearson, 162). Likewise, Kynes’ hallucinations adumbrate the downfall of his Fremen ideology when his father says, “no more terrible disaster could befall your people than for them to fall into the hands of a Hero” (Herbert 351).

Our “Hero” is Paul Atreides, and the Kynes hallucination is correct in identifying him as a terrible disaster. As he integrates with the Fremen, Paul adapts his rhetoric to align with theirs while maintaining his Machiavellian ambitions. After Kynes protects Paul and his mother Jessica during the destruction of the capital, Kynes questions himself, asking "Am I foolish to aid these fugitives? Why am I doing it?” (Herbert 280). When Kynes asks Paul how he would use the imperial ecological research center in which they are hiding, Paul replies, “to make this planet a fit place for humans” (Herbert 280). This elicits the internal response from Kynes “perhaps that’s why I help them” (Herbert 280). Early during Paul’s stay with the Fremen, he shifts his beliefs to match the popular opinion, but he never loses sight of the imperial throne. In the same scene, Paul discusses with Kynes and Jessica a course of action following the extermination of the Atreides clan, where he reveals his goal by saying “the emperor has no sons, only daughters,” which Jessica clarifies by asking “you’d aim for the throne?” (Herbert 283). Paul’s strategic use of ecological literacy garners social capital among the Fremen, building political support for his own ends.

Paul also uses ecological literacy to betray the Fremen and their ideology while gaining overwhelming political power. During an early conversation between Kynes and the Atreides leaders, Paul notices Kynes being evasive when discussing the connection between the sandworms and the spice, which causes him to internally diagnose “if there’s a relationship between spice and worms, killing the worms would destroy the spice” (Herbert 148). As Pearson writes “ecology functions as a literacy of power in the novel precisely because it is a language of complexity, revealing the world as a dynamic, interconnected system of critical thresholds and tipping points” (Pearson 162). This ecological truth is a guarded secret, representing a critical tipping point. Paul concludes that threatening the worms with extinction grants him control over

spice, a logic he uses when forcing himself onto the throne. Jessica details Paul's plan while on the run from the razed capital city, thinking "blackmail with the family atomics as a threat to the planet and its spice – that's what he has in mind" (Herbert 241). Paul then makes this exact threat to the emperor and the other Houses, relaying to his royal advisor that "they cannot risk our destroying the source of the spice" (Herbert 569). Paul aligns himself with the Fremen ideology to gain political power and actively weaponizes the inner workings of that ideology for himself, not the Fremen. As Joshua Pearson puts it "Paul's integration of the manipulative toolset of ecological literacy with the domineering, subordinating drive of the sovereign allows him to win the secrets of the world and the loyalty of its people" (Pearson 165). Paul manipulates the ecological secret of the sandworms not to better Arrakis, but to take the planet, and thus the novel's universe, hostage.

With Paul's rise to power, the danger of an ideological societal movement becomes fully realized. Kita Misha describes Paul as neither "the typical hero" nor an antihero but instead posits his role in the novel as "[resembling] more backstage machinery which Herbert uses to problematize different issues, not to offer a heroic solution to them" (Misha 16). Backstage or otherwise, Paul is certainly the vehicle through which the main flaws posthumanism critiques are displayed. Posthumanism, as Braidotti describes it, is a response to a societal threat, one that will require a sustained, universal, and focused effort to overcome. If we ascribe to a posthuman perspective, as the Fremen have, we should be constantly analyzing who is benefiting from the philosophical movement. Paul co-opts ecocentric rhetoric, repeating Fremen talking points and miming what he knows will be received well, before betraying his fashionable persuasion to lift himself onto the imperial throne.

Dune is the story of how philosophies can be molded to benefit the one liar who speaks convincingly. The Fremen demonstrate that when an ideology becomes motivated, activated, and weaponized, it becomes susceptible to manipulation that inevitably feeds power to a select few "representatives." If we are to overcome our present struggles as terrestrials, we must heed Frank Herbert's warning about instilling a widespread movement that seeks to solve universal problems, even if we believe in the movement as truth. For not only was our current ecological crisis and its philosophical solution foreseeable, but it was also foreseen.

Braidotti, Rosi. “Memoirs of a Posthumanist.” Posthuman, All Too Human: The Memoirs and Aspirations of a Posthumanist. Yale University, March 2017.

Haraway, Donna. Excerpts on Cyborg, Companion Species, and Chthulucene. Printed in Posthuman Studies Reader: Core Readings of Transhumanism, Posthumanism and Metahumanism, pp 141-159. Edited by Evi D. Sampanikou and Jan Stasienko. Schwabe Verlag, Basel, Switzerland, 2021.

Herbert, Frank. Dune. Hodder Paperback, London, England, 2006.

Misha, Kita. “The Human Non-Human Boundary in Dune: An Ontological Reading through a Comparative Nietzschean and Transhuman Framework.” Malmo University, Malmo, Sweden, 2020.

Pearson, Joshua. “Frank Herbert’s Dune and the Financialization of Heroic Masculinity.” CR: The New Centennial Review, vol. 19, no. 1, 2019, pp. 155–80. JSTOR, Accessed 17 Apr. 2024.

Header photo by Ned Presnall

“Great Dunes National Park”
