

# Is *Dune* (2021) an analogy for colonialism in the middle east and/or a subversion of the white saviour trope

Representation/Ideology

## Introduction

*Denis Villeneuve's* 2021 adaption of Frank Herbert's 1965 novel is set thousands of years in the future, mostly on a fictional planet named Arrakis, however the story may have been influenced by how the middle east has been treated by western countries, especially over oil, with the fictional substance "spice melange" taking the place of oil. The natives of Arrakis the "Fremen" are also heavily influenced by middle eastern and Muslim culture. *Dune* had previously been adapted in 1984 by David Lynch but this adaptation received less than favourable reviews from fans, critics, and David Lynch himself.

Many Arabic words and phrases are used throughout the novel and 2021 film, however one in particular had been omitted for what seems to be various social and political reasons. *Dune* has also been seen as a deconstruction of a chosen one narrative, as well as unintentionally to Frank Herbert at the time, a deconstruction of the white saviour trope that is prominent in many science fiction stories.

## Scene analysis: Opening Narration

*Dune* opens with an original made for the film narrated exposition scene from the character Chani, who is one of the Fremen. In this opening scene it is explained that the Harkonnen have oppressively ruled over Arrakis to farm spice melange. The way the scene is shot creates an oppressive atmosphere with the darker colours, shallower depth of field, and framing the spice harvesters in a way that obscures most of them in darkness and dust in the air. This creates a foreboding image that feels like a larger-than-life entity that has come to oppress the people living on Arrakis. This highly contrasts with the first few shots of the scene which show the calm, beautiful landscapes of Arrakis. The narration also pauses for a second and becomes more serious with line "at nightfall the spice harvesters land."

"They ravage our lands before our eyes" and "Their cruelty to our people is more than I can stand" are stated later in the narration. This can be seen as a form of exposition, clearly showing the audience how the Harkonnen have violently oppressed the people of Arrakis for years. "These outsiders, the Harkonnen, came long before I was born" is another line of

dialogue that spells out how the Fremen have been oppressed. As well as how it can be seen as an analogy for western imperialism in the middle east spanning decades. Overall, it seems as if this scene is an effective way of highlighting the analogy for how people in the middle east have been oppressed by western imperialism [<sup>Dune (2021)</sup>]

## Deconstruction of the Messianic Protagonist/White Saviour Trope

The protagonist Paul Atreides is seen as a messiah by multiple factions within the film. The Bene Gesserit who are a witch like sisterhood think Paul may be the *Kwisatz Haderach* who is prophesised to be a messianic superbeing created via years of selected breeding, that will bring humanity to a better future. However, they have their doubts about Paul being the *Kwisatz Haderach* as they intended for his mother to have a girl, who's offspring will be the *Kwisatz Haderach*. This plays into the trope as there is often a doubt about the protagonist being the "chosen one" to create conflict and doubt within the protagonist.

However, many of the Fremen think Paul is the Lisan al-Gaib which means off world prophet. This also leans into the middle eastern influence as Lisan al-Gaib is an actual Arabic phrase that roughly translates into "the tongue" (Hassanein, 2011) and "hidden" (Rekhta Dictionary, n.d.). Having another faction strongly believe that Paul is this chosen one helps create a conflict within the world and the character of Paul, as there are differing opinions on whether he is the messiah. This is something commonly seen in chosen one narratives to help escalate the drama

Dune may also be considered a white saviour narrative, as it sets up Paul as someone that frees the indigenous fremen from an oppressive regime. However, as the film foreshadows Paul becoming a genocidal dictator like figure over not just the fremen but the galaxy as a whole. This could be considered a subversion of the white saviour trope. However, as the novel was first published in 1965, taking social and racial contexts of the era into consideration, it is highly unlikely that Frank Herbert was aware of the concept of a white saviour and instead was aiming to subvert the chosen one narrative that has been observed in many stories throughout history. Despite trying to subvert the trope, Herbert's story may have influenced more messiah figures in fiction, in the decades since Dune was published, particularly in science fiction. Some examples being Star Wars, The Matrix, Terminator, and Avatar. With Avatar being seen as another white saviour story.

*Dune* (2021) only adapts the first half of Frank Herbert's novel, in this first half it is mainly setting up Paul Atreides as the Messiah, and only slightly foreshadowing what he becomes in some visions he has of potential futures, this may be why the first film was seen as a white saviour story as it does not reach the part of the book that subverts the trope as

*Dune: Part Two* (2024) covers this part of the story and has not faced the same criticism as the first part received.

## Use of Arabic Phrases in *Dune*

*Dune* and all of its adaptations have been noted to have been heavily influenced by Middle Eastern and Muslim culture especially on the planet of Arrakis, which has a remarkably similar name to the country of Iraq which has been fought over for decades for oil, similar to how Arrakis is fought over for spice. Within the book and film there are many Arabic terms used by the fremen, such as “Shai-Hulud” (meaning thing <sup>[Rekhta Dictionary, n.d.]</sup>, immortality) and the aforementioned “Lisan al-Gaib” being a few examples.

Despite this the term “Jihad” which is featured in the book, as well as being featured on the first page of the script in the 1984 David Lynch adaptation <sup>(Dune, 1984)</sup>. Is completely omitted from the Denis Villeneuve film “*In the film, they got rid of “jihad,” because—it’s pretty obvious, from the interviews with the film’s creators—they think “jihad” has some association with Islamic terrorism, at least in the public eye.*” <sup>(Durrani, 2023)</sup> This could potentially show that outside social and cultural influences shaped how the adaptation perceived certain elements of the book “*you don’t fix a race problem or a representation problem by deleting the people who are being represented. You deal with it. You say, “Okay, this is the problem. How do we deal with it?”*” <sup>(Durrani, 2023)</sup> Despite being a heavy topic and a word with negative implications in the public eye, perhaps a blockbuster film as large as *Dune* would have helped change the public perception of the word towards its original meaning and how it was used in the Frank Herbert books. The word roughly translates to “struggle” or “effort” in Arabic. “*Jihad, particularly in the religious and ethical realm, primarily refers to the human struggle to promote what is right and to prevent what is wrong.*” <sup>(Afsaruddin, 2019)</sup> This definition is closer to what Frank Herbert used in the *Dune* novel.

However, the term has been used in political contexts in the past few centuries, including the previously mentioned used by extremist terrorist groups. Especially in the years since Herbert’s novel and Lynch’s film. So, the filmmaker’s decision to avoid the baggage that comes along with using the term in the film could be understood. But the term could still be used in sequels such as *Dune: Part Two* or *Dune: Messiah* but it may be unlikely. Unless they are trying to hold off using the term until a suitable point in the narrative, to create more impact due to the real-world connotations. However, this hypothetical scenario would probably be seen as insensitive, as it could be seen as using the word purely for shock value.

## Conclusion

Despite the 896-page novel *Dune* (1965) being able to spend more time subverting the chosen one archetype, as well as being able to highlight more of what goes into the representation within the Fremen. The 2021 film only adapts the first half of the book, so we only see what seems to be a messiah/chosen one/ white saviour story as it does not reach the part of the book that subverts that trope. The opening narration seemed to be created for the film as it quickly goes over the oppression of the fremen and the potential middle eastern allegory as there is not enough time to showcase it throughout the film without affecting the pacing of the film. However, as it is the first part of a two-part film, more of this allegory could be displayed in the second part.

It does seem that the first part does set up this subversion to play out in the second part through the use of visions. But there is still the question of how the middle eastern allegories will be portrayed in the second part and if it will expand on what has been established in the first film about the oppression of the fremen and the imperialism allegory.

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