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Heroines of *Dune* (based on the novel by Frank Herbert and the film directed by Denis Villeneuve)¹

Bohaterki *Diuny* (na podstawie powieści Franka Herberta i filmu Denisa Villeneuve’a)

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Abstract

In *Dune*, Frank Herbert portrayed strong female characters who have a significant impact on the events presented in the novel. The power of femininity is manifested by, for example, members of the influential Bene Gesserit order who are implementing a long-term eugenics plan aimed at creating the Kwisatz Haderach – a man capable of controlling higher-order dimensions. The film, directed by Denis Villeneuve, reinforces the book’s feminist message through visuals, dialogues and plot changes. For example, to eliminate the disproportion between the number of women and men in *Dune*, the director replaced doctor Liet-Kynes, who is a man in the book, with a female character.

The *Dune Chronicles* series written by Frank Herbert (and continued by his heirs and other authors after Herbert’s death²) occupies a special place in the literary

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² After Frank Herbert’s death, his son, Brian Herbert, and Keven J. Anderson wrote a number of sequels and prequels to complete the original *Dune* series (including *Prelude to Dune*, *Legends of Dune*, and *Heroes of Dune*).

genre of science fiction. *Dune* has received numerous awards³ and captivated readers across generations, becoming a synonym of inspiring, ambitious⁴, and timeless science fiction literature.

Before it was published in book form in 1963, *Dune* had been serialised in *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*, one of the longest-established (since 1930) science fiction magazines in the USA. The novel continues to inspire debate, including in the academia, on politics, power, religion, colonialism, and ecology⁵. In the face of the looming climate catastrophe, *Dune* remains highly relevant sixty years after publication precisely because it can be analysed from an ecocritical perspective⁶.

The unflagging interest in *Dune* is also evidenced by the fact that the novel has been adapted into various media⁷, and its film adaptations⁸ have been most successful in uncovering new meanings and portraying the book's central themes in a modern light.

However, Herbert's novel has attained the status of a cult classic mostly in the conceptual domain, and the author's portrayal of female characters is one of the most interesting interpretative perspectives. This article focuses on the feminist theme in *Dune*. Therefore, the aim of this article was to examine the novel in the context of its female characters, their roles, female agency, and the meanings

³ The original novel received the most prestigious science fiction literary awards – the Nebula Award in 1965 and the Hugo Award in 1966. In 1987, *Dune* was voted the Best SF Novel of All Time by the readers of the *Locus* magazine (<https://www.locusmag.com/1998/Books/87alltimesf.html>).

⁴ “The novel was partly inspired by the intellectual discourse at the dawn of the New Age movement, and it is regarded as a ‘difficult’ example of science fiction. *Dune* is full of action and adventure, but symbols and meanings are condensed in a series of narrative sequences, and the readers are confronted with complex intrigues, difficult moral, philosophical, and religious problems that require considerable erudition. This is particularly evident in the following parts of the *Dune* saga, where the adventure story has been partly replaced with philosophical and political topics” (Gemra 2006: 113).

⁵ Cf. Kowalski 2021, Smykowski 2022.

⁶ The desert planet Arrakis could have become a green and prosperous world had it not been plundered by the spice miners (an allusion to the oil industry), and it is an obvious metaphor for man's destructive activities which lead to environmental degradation and ecosystem depletion.

⁷ *Dune* continues to inspire the developers of digital games (such as the real-time strategy game series comprising *Dune*, *Dune II*, *Dune 2000*, *Emperor: Battle for Dune*), role playing games (*Dune: Adventures in the Imperium*, Modiphius, Alis Games), and board games (*Diuna: Imperium*, Lucky Duck Games). The novel has been also adapted into many comic book series, including *Dune. The Graphic Novel. Book 1* and *Book 2: Muad'Dib*; *Dune: House Ardeides*, *Dune: The Waters of Kanly*, *Dune: Tales from Arrakeen*.

⁸ Cinematic adaptations of Frank Herbert's work will be discussed in subsequent parts of the paper. However, the article focuses on the latest film adaptation directed by Denis Villeneuve.

they evoke in the portrayed world. The extent to which the novel's feminist themes have been transposed into the Denis Villeneuve's film adaptation of *Dune* are also analysed. Following in the footsteps of Kara Kennedy's work, the film is examined in the context of second-wave feminism, both from the revisionist and affirmative perspectives of the feminist movement.

An analysis of feminist themes in *Dune* poses many interpretational problems because the novel centres around the messianic figure of the male protagonist, Paul Arteides, the 'white saviour'⁹ who wields control over the women present in his life. However, such a superficial interpretation of the novel definitely detracts from the female characters' influence on the portrayed world. The female protagonists of *Dune* are women of power who are influential, respected, possess prophetic abilities (both in the mystical realm and in politics), and even inspire fear. Therefore, Herbert's novel abounds in paradoxes, and the author relies on contrast as the guiding principle behind the organisational structure of the universe. On the one hand, female protagonists are independent characters who possess vast strength, knowledge and skills, while on the other hand, they are a part of Paul Arteides' plan to become the saviour of the universe.

The description of women's status in the world of the precious "spice"¹⁰ should begin with a characterisation (or rather a reminder) of the relationships and forces that govern the world portrayed in the novel. The feudal world of the futuristic Middle Ages¹¹ – the story begins in the year 10191 – is dominated

⁹ According to Jacek Dukaj, *Dune* was also popular among the proponents of "racial purity" and the supporters of social Darwinism and the Übermensch concept because Paul Arteides was portrayed as a product of a eugenics program and the film featured racially-biased language and ambiguous mysticism" (Dukaj 2021: online). However, there is no doubt that both Herbert and Villeneuve modelled their respective versions of Paul Arteides on Lawrence of Arabia. Frank Jacob dedicated an entire chapter of his book to a comparison of the main protagonists in Herbert's book and Villeneuve's film: "Two foreigners move into desert lands where they find indigenous people who are ready for rebellion against exploitative rulers. Both lead them to military victory, yet while Lawrence was really interested in providing the Arab people with their own choice for the future, Paul is leading the Fremen into a holy war against the whole universe instead" (Jacob 2022: 79).

¹⁰ The "spice" or "melange" is a hallucinogenic drug that increases life expectancy. The spice was found exclusively on Arrakis, and it was used by the Guild navigators during interstellar travel and by the Bene Gesserit to enter into a ritual trance. Therefore, the spice was the most coveted substance in the entire universe.

¹¹ This term was used by Wojciech Orliński to describe the literary device used by Stanisław Lem in *Fables for Robots*. According to Orliński, Herbert relied on a similar philosophy: "However, Lem was the first science fiction writer to perform an original stylistic trick – he combined the science-fiction staffage (robots, spaceships, antimatter) with the language of fairy tales [...] Lem created a retro-futuristic reality, and painted a picture of the universe many years after the robots had managed to break from human control. This blend of "retro" styles with futuristic technology is also

by forces of which Lady Jessica is reminded by Gaius Helen Mohiam, the Reverend Mother of the Bene Gesserit order, already at the beginning of the novel:

Don't be facetious, girl! You know as well as I do what forces surround us. We've a three-point civilization: the Imperial Household balanced against the Federated Great Houses of the Landsraad, and between them, the Guild with its damnable monopoly on interstellar transport (Herbert 2020: 36).

The fate of the cosmos thus rests in the hands of the Ruler of the Known Universe, Emperor Padishah Shaddam IV, and his elite military force, the Sardaukar, who are feared by the noble houses of Landsraad. The third force is the CHOAM, “an acronym for Combine Honnete Ober Advancer Mercantiles – the universal development corporation controlled by the Emperor and Great Houses with the Guild and Bene Gesserit as silent partners” (Herbert 2020: 656). The Guild is a mercantile organisation that controls interplanetary travel, whereas the Bene Gesserit is the most important bastion of female power. All actors are politically and economically dependent on the mining of melange, the “spice of spices” that is found only on Arrakis, the planet known as Dune.

Bene Gesserit as the manifestation of female power

Kara Kennedy's *Women's Agency in the Dune Universe: Tracing Women's Liberation Through Science Fiction* is probably the most comprehensive analysis of female characters¹² in the *Dune* saga. Kennedy examines how female protagonists secure control and influence through embodied agency (Kennedy 2022: IX). She also explores the social and cultural movements at the time the novel was written and observes that the portrayal of women in *Dune* was clearly influenced by second-wave feminism. The feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s (both in the socio-political and academic context) pushed forward the gender stratification perspective, where “the status of women was no longer defined relative to men (as the universal category) or relative to their value, attributes, and potential for personal growth” (Burzyńska 2009: 397).

present in other literary works, most notably in Frank Herbert's *Dune*, but this comparison only reinforces the brilliance of *Fables for Robots* (Orliński 2007: 24).

¹² Kara Kennedy notes that feminist themes have been largely disregarded in the academic discussion about *Dune*. Despite the fact that Herbert created female characters that are unique in the world of science fiction literature, most academics focused on the author's portrayal of the messianic archetype, ecology, religion, and politics (Kennedy 2022: 5).

Citing Alice Echols (*Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967–1975*) and Rosemarie Tong (*Feminist Thought. A More Comprehensive Introduction*), Kennedy notes that the portrayal of women in Herbert’s novel was particularly influenced by radical feminist movements which recognised that women should have the full right to bodily autonomy, decision-making, and agency in every aspect of their lives. According to Kennedy, these issues are particularly evident in the way female characters, especially members of the Bene Gesserit order, are portrayed in *Dune*.

The concept of women in control over their bodies is important to an analysis of the *Dune* series because it forms the backbone of the philosophy of the Bene Gesserit, whose members train their bodies extensively in order to establish precise control over nearly all of their functions (Kennedy 2022: 13).

The Bene Gesserit matriarchal order was created after the Butlerian Jihad¹³, when “the God of machine-logic was overthrown among the masses and a new concept was raised: ‘Man may not be replaced’” (Herbert 2020: 637). Physical and mental training became a compulsory “religion” to enable humans achieve the cognitive capacities of computing machines (Mentats or human computers).

In the Bene Gesserit¹⁴, this concept takes on the form of a millennia-long eugenics project, where humans are “sifted” through selective breeding and the most desirable bloodlines of the major houses are manipulated to produce the Messiah, a being that can control time and space and restore balance in the universe.

¹³ In the world created by Frank Herbert, there are no technologies based on artificial intelligence. All forms of intelligent machines were exterminated by the Butlerian Jihad. The glossary at the end of the novel provides the following information about the Butlerian Jihad: “the crusade against computers, thinking machines, and conscious robots begun in 201 B.G. [Before Guild] and concluded in 108 B.G. Its chief commandment remains in the O.C. [Orange Catholic] Bible as ‘Thou shalt not make a machine in the likeness of a human mind’” (Herbert 2020: 651–652).

¹⁴ In the novel, the Bene Gesserit appear mainly as a political force that often use religion to achieve their goals (for example, by spreading prophecies about the coming of a messiah on alien planets), and their political agenda was hidden behind a veil of religious rituals. The appendix at the end of the novel, entitled “The Religion of *Dune*”, describes the main forces that shaped the dominant religious beliefs in the empire. These included the Bene Gesserit “who privately denied they were a religious order, but who operated behind an almost impenetrable screen of ritual mysticism, and whose training, whose symbolism, organisation, and internal teaching methods were almost wholly religious” (Herbert 2020: 635). Herbert attended a Jesuit school, and the Sisterhood was partly modelled on the Jesuit order. Joanna Kułakowska wrote: “The Bene Gesserit, like the Jesuits of old, are present in courts and operate a network of agents and a superbly disciplined army. The organisation is interested in power, but it has a cynical and accurate view of politics. The Sisters skilfully use religion, philosophy, and history to their advantage, and they rely on rhetorical despotism to discredit their opponents” (Kułakowska 2024: 6).

The details of this far-reaching plan are discussed in the “Report on Bene Gesserit Motives and Purposes” which was prepared at the request of Lady Jessica and is presented in Appendix III to the novel:

The Bene Gesserit program had as its target the breeding of a person they labelled “Kwisatz Haderach,” a term signifying “one who can be many places at once.” In simpler terms, what they sought was a human with mental powers permitting him to understand and use higher order dimensions. They were breeding for a super-Mentat, a human computer with some of the prescient abilities found in Guild navigators (Herbert 2020: 643–644).

In *Dune*, the Messiah is Paul Arteides, the son of Duke Leto, ruler of the planet Caladan, and his concubine, Lady Jessica, a member of the Bene Gesserit. Lady Jessica disobeys the order by giving birth to a son rather than a daughter because she loves Leto and believes that her son will fulfil the messianic prophecy. The Bene Gesserit believe in the coming of Kwisatz Haderach, a being with immeasurable power who, unlike the sisters, would have access to the genetic memories of both female and male ancestors, as the “one who can be in many places at once”.

The ever-present conflict between opposing life forces and processes (feminine vs. masculine, logic vs. intuition, life vs. death, past vs. future, abundance of water vs. drought) suggests that Herbert’s novel can be interpreted in the spirit of Far Eastern mysticism, the New Age movement, and the Taoist view of the universe. This perspective was adopted by Dominika Oramus who posited that *Dune* embodies a vision of the future based on Taoist principles (Oramus 2011: 163). The researcher noted that the Bene Gesserit, the ancient matriarchal school of mental and physical training, could be a model representation of New Age concepts:

[...] For them, [New Age followers], the Bene Gesserit is the model organisation. The order wields political power by training female warriors who will become the wives and concubines of political leaders (their ESP abilities prove to be useful in imperial courts). Depending on their genetic predisposition, the graduates have psychic powers which are enhanced through the use of drugs (Oramus 2011: 165).

The Bene Gesserit’s training methods (prana-bindu¹⁵) and the warriors’ ability to use the acquired skills in crisis situations resemble popular culture depictions of monks who train in Far Eastern monasteries (such as Shaolin) and learn

¹⁵ Prana-bindu training enabled the sisters to exercise full control over their muscles and nerves.

to control the elements. However, the Bene Gesserit's students became masters of their physiology not only by learning to control their breathing, muscles, and heart rhythm, but also by becoming intimately acquainted with their cellular structure. The power of female agency is evocatively described in the scene where Lady Jessica is forced to become the Fremens' Reverend Mother by drinking the "water of life", a poisonous liquid extracted from sandworms. The poison was lethal for humans, and it could be neutralised only by a Bene Gesserit.

She focused on the psychokinesthetic extension of herself, looking within, and was confronted immediately with a cellular core, a pit of blackness from which she recoiled. [...] The stuff was dancing particles within her, its motions so rapid that even frozen time could not stop them. Dancing particles. She began recognizing familiar structures, atomic linkages: a carbon atom here, helical wavering... a glucose molecule. An entire chain of molecules confronted her, and she recognized a protein... a methyl-protein configuration. It was a soundless mental sigh within her as she saw the nature of the poison. With her psychokinesthetic probing, she moved into it, shifted an oxygen mote, allowed another carbon mote to link, reattached a linkage of oxygen... hydrogen (Herbert 2020: 453).

Through years of physical and mental conditioning, the Bene Gesserit not only learned to manipulate the most subtle physiological processes in their bodies (they could also exercise control over their child's sex), but they were also endowed with the power of Voice¹⁶, a technique that enabled them to control others by merely modulating their voice pitch and giving orders with a specific sound frequency. Even Thufir Hawat, the Mentat of House Arteides, was astonished at Lady Jessica's ability to keep him seated:

The old Mentat almost fell back into the chair, so quickly did his muscles betray him. Hawat tried to swallow in a dry throat. Her [Jessica's] command had been regal, peremptory – uttered in a tone and manner he had found completely irresistible. His body had obeyed her before he could think about it. Nothing could have prevented his response – not logic, not passionate anger... nothing. To do what she had done spoke of a sensitive, intimate knowledge of the person thus commanded, a depth of control he had not dreamed possible (Herbert 2020: 205–206).

¹⁶ According to Kara Kennedy, the power of Voice embodies the achievements of second-wave feminism. Feminism provided women with a voice in the pursuit of their rights, agency, and autonomy in speaking about their problems, identity, history, and creativity. Kennedy wrote: "Two other relevant issues in second-wave feminism are women's right to speak and their right to recover the history of their foremothers. For women, the right to speak meant having the right to not only express themselves without being silenced, but also be listened to and trusted rather than dismissed" (Kennedy 2022: 13).

The described abilities suggest that the Bene Gesserit's powers were manifested on three levels: the macro level – through the centuries-long breeding program designed to control births and manipulate the most desirable genetic lines in the major houses; the micro level – by controlling physiological processes in their bodies at the cellular level; and the intermediate level – by directly controlling others through the power of the Voice, manipulation, and combat skills.

Denis Villeneuve's cinematic adaptation of Herbert's novel

The history of cinematic and small-screen adaptations¹⁷ of Frank Herbert's multifaceted novel deserves a separate study. The multitude of complex story lines added to the novel's depth and intricacy and posed a significant challenge for subsequent directors. In the mid-1970s, Alejandro Jodorowsky appeared to be the only director who could successfully undertake this impossible task. Jodorowsky's *Dune* is considered to be one of the most famous unmade films of all time¹⁸. The project never came to fruition, but the aborted attempt at adapting the classic novel was presented in a feature-length documentary¹⁹ recounting the fate of this spectacular and incredibly expensive work of cinematic art.

Dino De Laurentiis bought the rights to *Dune* and hired David Lynch as the director. Lynch's adaptation polarised the viewers, and its aesthetic elements have been described as "ridiculously sublime" (Žižek 2011: 267). Visually fascinating and stunning, the film was equally revolting and over-stylised, and it turned out to be a financial flop. Lynch's characteristic avant-garde style, which is evident in his previous films (*Eraserhead*, *The Elephant Man*), his "ostentatious focus on the novel's visual suggestiveness", "rejection of good taste and unbridled phantasmagoria" (Szyłak 2011: 181) not only failed to bring the desired effect in *Dune*, but were a source of irritation²⁰. Lynch himself regarded *Dune* as one of the

¹⁷ Herbert's novel was also adapted into two TV miniseries: *Frank Herbert's Dune* (2000) directed by John Harrison and *Children of Dune* (2003) directed by Greg Yaitanes.

¹⁸ Jodorowsky planned to cast the greatest stars in leading roles, including Salvador Dalí, Orson Welles, Gloria Swanson, David Carradine, Mick Jagger, Udo Kier, and Amanda Lear. The music for the film was to be recorded by progressive rock groups such as Tangerine Dream, Gong, Mike Oldfield, Pink Floyd, and Magma. Set and character designs were to be developed by H. R. Giger (who won the Oscar for visual effects in Ridley Scott's *Alien*), as well as famous science fiction illustrators Chris Foss and Jean Giraud.

¹⁹ Pavich Frank, director (2013), *Jodorowsky's Dune*, Sony Pictures Classics, USA.

²⁰ Krzysztof Loska aptly summarised the critics' and viewers' opinions about the film: "This epic show with a gigantic budget, full of religious and mystical symbolism, did not elicit an enthusiastic

greatest pitfalls in his cinematic career, and he eventually distanced himself from the production and demanded that his name be removed from the credits. Despite financial and artistic problems, Lynch's film became a classic and a reference point for other directors attempting to adapt Herbert's saga.

As previously mentioned, Denis Villeneuve's *Dune*²¹, the most recent cinematic adaptation of Herbert's novel that premiered in 2021²², appears to be most relevant in the context of feminist themes. Villeneuve became fascinated with *Dune* in his teenage years, and the cinematic adaptation of the novel became his lifetime dream. Unlike Lynch who was not a particularly experienced director when he embarked on the project, Villeneuve had an established reputation as a filmmaker and considerable experience with high-budget productions (*Blade Runner 2049*, *Arrival*). The availability of sophisticated editing capabilities and visual effects at the time the movie was made undoubtedly contributed to the success of Villeneuve's adaptation of the novel.

Villeneuve's film covers only the first half of the novel, and it ends when Paul and his mother are exiled to the desert. In general, the film received an enthusiastic response from the viewers who praised the director's complex approach to the presented themes and his ability to create an immersive experience based on carefully crafted visuals and sound effects. However, Villeneuve's *Dune* was also criticised for devaluing the novel's ideological depth and turning it into a visual spectacle. Yosr Dridi argued that the director failed to capture Herbert's Arab/Muslim-inspired characterisation of the Fremen culture. According to the researcher, Villeneuve's rendition of oriental themes in the novel was shallow and superficial²³. In turn, Misha Grifka Wander criticised the film for failing to depict Herbert's criticism of colonialism and the myth of the charismatic leader, and for abandoning the philosophical and theological depth of the original in favour

response from film critics or the public. The story of Paul Arteides (...), suggestively portrayed by Frank Herbert in the novel, is lost in an ocean of visual effects in the film. Unusual set design, outlandish costumes, and the need to find a compromise between the novel's 'mystical' qualities and the demands of a huge cinematographic production prevented Lynch from creating a great work of art" (Loska 2004: 237–238).

²¹ The film was scheduled for release in November 2020 (the 100th anniversary of Herbert's birth), but it was delayed by one year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. *Dune: Part Two* premiered in February/March 2024.

²² Villeneuve Denis, director (2021), *Dune*, Warner Bros, USA/United Kingdom/Hungary/Canada.

²³ "Unlike Herbert's orientalism which seems to stem from a genuine desire to know the other and comprehend the minutest details of their culture, Villeneuve's orientalism is blatantly disinterested in such knowledge, cloaking the characters, setting, and theme – the film's entire storyworld – in a blanket of cultural ambiguity" (Dridi 2022: 63).

of a typical Hollywood story of a protagonist's journey²⁴. The film was also criticised for not casting Middle Eastern or North African (MENA) actors in prominent roles.

Villeneuve's film also departs from the original novel in its portrayal of feminist themes. Before embarking on the project, the director knew which aspects of Herbert's novel would be most important for his production²⁵. When asked by Eric Roth, a collaborator and scriptwriter who worked on screenplays for Oscar-nominated films such as *Forrest Gump*, *Munich*, and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, to describe his version of the film in a single word, Villeneuve said:

The women. [...] They control procreation [...] and have wisdom that leads humans to enlightenment [...]. Most political movements in the novel are led by men who respond impulsively to what is happening at a given moment [...]. The Bene Gesserit perceive time differently. They strategize for the long term and think in terms of centuries, even millennia. That's how they manipulate the course of humanity. They think of long-term, rather than immediate results. They lead because they have influence, not a dominant position (Lapointe 2022: 22).

Villeneuve's film departs from the original story and deploys a unique visual style to emphasise the female themes in Herbert's novel. Feminist issues are accentuated already at the beginning of the film. Similarly to Lynch's adaptation, the prologue is narrated by a woman. However, it is not read by Princess Irulan, who is quoted²⁶ at the beginning of every chapter and acts as the novel's narrator, but by Chani, the valiant Fremen warrior and Paul's concubine, who describes life

²⁴ "Presumably Villeneuve wished to have the space to portray the vast sweep of Dune's saga; unfortunately, in doing so, he fit Dune into the traditional Hollywood epic formula, stripping Herbert's more subtle critique of colonialism and charismatic leadership. [...] While the original novel is not without moments of orientalism, simplifying the story for the screen highlights the orientalism and exoticization without the commensurate engagement with theology and philosophy" (Wander 2022: 86).

²⁵ The film was widely praised for its visual effects, but some critics argued that the visual flair detracted from the message of Herbert's novel. "The latest screen adaptation of Herbert's novel is a visual masterpiece. However, it disregards the complex portrayal of the characters in the novel and the author's political sensibility rooted in Jung's theories, drug experimentation, and support for the Republican Party" (Frelik 2021: online).

²⁶ Krzysztof M. Maj analysed the prologue in the context of allotopy and allohistory: "The protagonist's history is presented through quotations from fictional sources, and the readers are exposed to a fictional world that extends beyond the presented world already at the beginning of the novel. As a result, Paul Muad'Dib's 'present' story is asynchronous with Paul Muad'Dib's 'future' story, which does not change the fact that it is the story of the same man, where the gaps in personal data are filled with metadata from a fictitious encyclopaedia" (Maj 2015: 229).

on Arrakis under the rule of the Harkonnen. The prologue is a symbolic gesture because it gives voice to a representative of the oppressed masses, rather than to Irulan, an aristocrat and the Emperor's daughter. According to Yosr Dridi, the prologue suggests that the story will be told from the perspective of the indigenous people living in *Dune*'s deserts:

Chani seems to usurp Irulan's authoritative voice and rewrite a history of her home planet from below rather than the history of the victor written by the Empire. This politically-charged departure from the novel empowering a colonized woman of colour in the cinematic adaptation is certainly in line with the progressive, 'woke' culture that informs the entertainment industry in the 21st century. [...] By leaving epigraphic framing to Chani instead of Irulan, Villeneuve perpetuates this minority-empowering practice not only in the historical world (by casting an actress with African origins), but also in the fictional world of the film (by giving voice, authority, and agency to the oppressed) (Dridi 2022: 60).

However, Dridi notes that this commendable divergence from the novel is short-lived because for the next two and a half hours, the film focuses on Paul, the white male protagonist.

In the film, the feminist theme is also accentuated through visuals by subtly highlighting the cultural symbolism associated with female fertility. This reference is made when the Bene Gesserit and the Reverend Mother arrive on the planet Caladan. The spaceship in which they arrive was purposefully designed to elicit specific connotations²⁷. "It is no coincidence that the Bene Gesserit spaceship is egg shaped, a symbol of fertility" (Lapointe 2022: 48–49).

The dialogue between Paul Arteides and Gaius Helen Mohiam, the Imperial Truthsayer (in the 28th minute of the film), also departs from the original story to reinforce the film's feminist message. The dialogue takes place directly after the Gom Jabbar test which plays a crucial role in the story. The Reverend Mother tells Paul about his special qualities:

"Like sifting sand through a screen. We sift people. If you were unable to control your impulses, like an animal – we could not let you live. You inherit too much power."

"Because I'm a Duke's son?"

"Because you are Jessica's son. You have more than one birth right, boy" (*Dune*, 2021).

²⁷ Other symbolic associations that are highly relevant for the film can be found in Władysław Kopaliński's *Słownik symboli* (Dictionary of Symbols): "the egg symbolises chaos, the embryo of the Universe, or the Universe itself [...] The egg combines the symbolism of security, tranquillity, home, nest, and shell with the image of a hatchling that taps its beak against the inside of the egg shell to break out of its prison. Therefore, the egg is a symbol of an internal contradiction" (Kopaliński 2001: 110).

This statement clearly indicates that Paul was able to pass subsequent tests and become the Kwisatz Haderach only through the guidance of his mother who trained him to master some of the Bene Gesserit abilities. The pattern of patrilineal succession is thus reversed.

Villeneuve's work also diverges from the novel in that the character of Liet-Kynes, the Imperial Planetologist of Arrakis, was swapped from male in the book to female in the film. This change received considerable attention from the fans, and it appears to have stemmed from Villeneuve's ambition to make his film more sensitive to the expectations of modern viewers and better balanced in terms of gender diversity²⁸. In the film, Liet-Kynes is portrayed by the British actor Sharon Duncan-Brewster. In an attempt to explore the relationship between women and power, the Villeneuve decided to focus on the essence rather than gender of the character who plays a conciliatory role in the story. As a representative of different worlds, Liet-Kynes enjoys widespread respect. "He connects all the dots. He connects the Harkonnens, he connects House Arteides, he connects the Fremen, planet Arrakis, the sandworms. This is somebody who understands all these worlds and moves in between each and every one, seemingly with one agenda" (Kaye 2020). By casting a woman in this role, Villeneuve was able to reinforce the feminist theme and portray a strong heroine without misrepresenting the original character or introducing substantial changes to the plot.

Summary

Frank Herbert's ambitious work has enriched the canon of science fiction literature by introducing interesting (in terms of personal motives and means of achieving personal goals), strong, and psychologically complex female characters. The gradual implementation of the Bene Gesserit's millennia-long eugenics programme is a drop that drills the rock of the futuristic feudal empire, and it enables the Sisterhood to influence political leaders' decisions. These complex characters "combine the seductive wiles of a courtesan with the untouchable majesty of a virgin goddess" (Herbert 2020: 34). The Bene Gesserit are sensual, yet lethally dangerous, cunning, and capable of detecting even the slightest lie. The heroines of *Dune* bridge different worlds – they exist between rival powers and

²⁸ Villeneuve described his focus on the female characters in an interview: "For me, it was important to bring more femininity to the story. [...] I am fascinated by the relationship of femininity and power, the place of women in society" (Sharf 2021).

their conflicting goals (political, social and economic), creating a network of influence that allows them to pursue their agenda.

Denis Villeneuve accentuated the role of women in his life in many interviews, and the feminist theme was particularly relevant for the director in his attempts to make Herbert's novel more relevant for the modern audience in terms of gender diversity. In the novel, feminism is obscured by the myth of the male saviour, but it emerges as one of the key themes of Villeneuve's cinematic adaptation that influences the ideological and visual elements in the film.

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