



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS
Hugvísindasvið

**The Bene Gesserit in Frank Herbert's
Dune**

An analysis.

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Luis Felipe Torres Meza

December 2010

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Abstract.

The following is a work of literary analysis involving Frank Herbert's *Dune*, which is the first published tome of what later became known as the *Dune Chronicles*. The *Chronicles* comprise six books authored by Frank Herbert many of which are referred to here, but this work centres only on *Dune*.

This literary analysis focuses on the Bene Gesserit, an organization of women which plays a large part in the development of Herbert's novel. The main objective of the discussion is to describe this conglomerate of characters and analyse it as one single collective character with its own story and its own characteristics in order to expand the understanding of *Dune*.

Although much work about this science fiction novel exists today, the implications of the Bene Gesserit have not been adequately discussed. There are critics who condemn Herbert's depiction of women in his universe based on the comparison of power between the novel's protagonist hero, Paul Atreides and his Bene Gesserit counterparts. Another important tendency in *Dune* criticism is the inaccurate view that limits the understanding of the Bene Gesserit as a religious organization, although *Dune* itself provides readers with evidence to the contrary.

In this essay, these academic positions are explored and analysed. Then it proceeds to a brief comparison of *Dune* and the Monomyth structure proposed by Joseph Campbell, which is useful in the analysis of this novel's characters. Then follows an analysis describing the Bene Gesserit as a character in Aristotelian terms of tragedy, and it concludes with commentary about the main Bene Gesserit sisters that appear in *Dune*, which has as its goal to present them as the actors through which the Bene Gesserit as an organization can be seen and through which Herbert establishes reason versus emotion as central to *Dune*'s plot.

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1. Introduction.

1.1. General Introduction: Women of *Dune*.

Published in 1965 and given the Hugo Award in 1966, *Dune* is one of the most widely read novels of the science fiction genre. There is a lot of scholarly work around the main characters and its religious or ecological themes. However, there is little work directed at a theme that is central to the construction of its plot, that is, the involvement of the non-archetypal female figure of the Bene Gesserit.

Dune's plot centres on the development of a hero who gains control of the planet Arrakis a.k.a. Dune and is framed by the story of the Bene Gesserit, an all female organisation which aims to "produce a genetically superior male being, capable of looking into parts of the soul where the women cannot look" (Reid 175). The Bene Gesserit calls this male being "Kwisatz Haderach" and the hero, Paul Atreides, happens to be it. The hero's development and his relation to the Bene Gesserit will be presented in terms of Campbell's monomyth in the next section.

A misconception that exists in literature about Herbert's *Dune* is that the Bene Gesserit is a religious organization and that the Kwisatz Haderach is "prophesized." Author Flo Keyes writes in *The Literature of Hope in the Middle Ages and today*: "He (Paul Atreides) is the prophesized Kwisatz Haderach; the only man who can take the Truthsayer's drug and live. (Keyes 157)" In *Prophesying: Webster's Quotations, Facts and Phrases* published by Inc Icon Group International the following entry appears. "The Kwisatz Haderach is a fictional name of a prophesied messiah figure in the Dune universe, created by Frank Herbert." (Inc Icon Group International 43)

Paul Atreides is in fact two foreseen figures in one. Firstly, he is the rational product of the Bene Gesserit genetic program, the one they call Kwisatz Haderach. And secondly, he is the Mahdi or Lisan al-Gaib, the religiously prophesised figure in which the

Fremen, the desert tribes of Dune, believe. A factor that may add to the confusion is that the Bene Gesserit anticipates both figures, one through the apparently scientific minds behind the genetic program, and another through the faction of the Bene Gesserit known as the Missionaria Protectiva, which specializes in engineering religions for definite purposes. In this case, the purpose was to create a man who would lead the Fremen. Frank Herbert also states that the Bene Gesserit works behind a religious screen to hide their real motivations.

Scholarly work about Dune finds the depiction of women problematic. Author Robin Anne Reid wrote that although *Dune* did advance the depiction of women in science fiction, “Women (in Dune) exist for the furtherance of the men around them, and have no independent goals of their own.” (Reid 175) In apparent agreement, author Donald Palumbo wrote in his essay *The Monomyth as a fractal pattern in Frank Herbert’s Dune Series*:

The monomyth as Campbell describes it is a structure that shapes the adventure of the male hero only, relegating to women such roles as “crone,” “goddess,” or “temptress”. Although Herbert does not go so far as to create a female monomythic hero, another of his innovations is frequently to have a female character share in the hero’s role, in addition to assuming those roles normally taken by women in the monomyth. (Palumbo 438)

However, none of the authors seem to consider the subtext of the plot that includes the original and different intentions of the Bene Gesserit to create the Kwisatz Haderach as a commodity for them to use, or the independent powers that they possess which allow them to create it. In taking this position, Reid and Palumbo both hint at the fact that women and men are in fact different in Herbert’s *Dune*, although the differences found between male and female characters in the plot are circumstantial differences and not representative of an ideology which views women as inferior.

The universe of *Dune* is characterised by multiple factions that strive for power. Power is represented by the spice melange, a substance only found in Arrakis and which has powers to augment lifespan and grants psychic powers to individuals. Herbert plays with several kinds of power. These are visible in the influence of the noble houses (such as the Imperial house, House Harkonnen and House Atreides), the economic influence of the CHOAM and the space travel monopoly of the Spacing Guild.

Of all these powers, the Bene Gesserit represents a venue that can be said to stand not only with them, but also above them in certain aspects. Their influence is not diminished by the fact that they are women, and more than that it is heightened by the same fact. Because they are women, they have access to the mystical power of the spice that grants them seemingly psychic powers. Furthermore, the scenario in which the monomythic adventure of Paul is of Bene Gesserit design, as further discussed in this text.

As this suggests, gender is a theme in Herbert's *Dune*, but it encompasses additional elements to what Reid and Palumbo suggest. Author Adam Charles Roberts more accurately approaches this gender rift. He writes:

... Potent though the female purchase on these mystical abilities is, there is something a woman lacks that this man has, something that will empower him to do things that a woman cannot do. On a symbolic level, it seems clear there is some transcendental signifier being alluded to here. (Roberts, 46)

While the transcendental signifier is not specified in his text, Roberts points out the fact that it is the difference between male and female that encourages the Bene Gesserit's search for their Kwisatz Haderach. A man can look where no Bene Gesserit sister can and that is a mere fact. The Bene Gesserit powers are greater in Paul because he happens not to be a woman. Nonetheless we must keep in mind that Paul is not just *any* man, but a man that has been genetically designed to have a superior access to these abilities.

Author David M. Miller did find in 1980 an approach that reconciles both power and gender exclusively in the Kwisatz Haderach. He wrote in his work *Frank Herbert*:

Paul (Herbert's Hero) has been trained in disparate disciplines: mentat (male) and Bene Gesserit (female) (...) Thus Paul's early training prepares him to be androgynous, for his mother pursues the Bene Gesserit goal: To breed a Tieresian Kwisatz Haderach who will have access to both male and female genetic memory, (Miller, 36)¹

Although he does acknowledge that Paul's greatness comes from the fact that he has mastered both feminine and masculine traits of power, there is no consideration that Bene Gesserit's aim is not to create a Kwisatz Haderach per se, but to obtain even more power by manipulating their genetically engineered creation; as the setting behind the monomythic plot might substantiate as discussed in the second section of this discussion.

Although the analyses of both Roberts and Miller point to the fact that Paul Atreides is in fact given a superior power because he is a male, there is evidence in the text that the women of *Dune*, represented by the Bene Gesserit, have goals of their own to which the Kwisatz Haderach is a means rather than an end and to which the dominion over this particular man is instrumental. However, their eventual failure to do so owes to a tragic flaw in the design that highlights, especially through Bene Gesserit characters, *Dune's* contrasting a cold and calculated human nature against a warmer and more empathic one.

¹ In Greek mythology, a blind Theban seer. The figure of Tieresias recurs in European literature, both as prophet and as man-woman. (Merriam-Webster Inc., 1117)

1.2. Campbell's Monomyth and *Dune* compared.

A full study of *Dune*'s plot would be quite lengthy because of the numerous characters and themes that it encompasses. However, a discussion in terms of Campbell's monomyth, not uncommon in academic discussion, is included in the present work because it provides readers with a compact understanding of its intricate plot. An analysis of this nature does not provide a full understanding of *Dune* because it centres mostly in the novel's central conflicts. Nonetheless, the analysis itself provides evidence on how much Herbert relies on the Bene Gesserit for the advancement of the plot, thus furthering the later claims of the present discussion.

In *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell writes about the monomyth, to which he also refers as *The Hero's Quest* that it is "a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation-initiation-return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth." (Campbell, 28) He explicates by saying that the adventure may be understood as a separation from the regular world, a penetration to some sort of power and a life enhancing return. (Campbell 28) In the same book, Campbell provides his readers with a diagram (Fig. 1) which efficiently summarises this structural model, to which I will refer as I provide the reader with a short summary of *Dune* corresponding to the stages.



This figure, which must be read counter-clockwise, beginning from “Call to adventure” and finishing with the “Elixir” represents the entirety of Campbell’s theory.

The brackets represent mostly the greatest conflicts that occur in the plot, and to which all previous events must build up to although not all the events listed in each bracket must occur. Correspondingly *Dune* consists of the story of Paul Atreides told in three sections that Herbert calls books, and which fit these three phases of Campbell’s hero’s journey. Thus we might say that *Book I: Dune* corresponds to the events that build up to the crossing of the first threshold (the middle division of the diagram’s circle), *Book II: Muad’Dib* corresponds to the events leading up to the crossing of the Return Threshold (it occurs in the unknown world away from the Empire and its rules) And *Book III: The Prophet* corresponds with the actual crossing of the return Threshold (past the middle of the circle diagram) and the return of Paul Atreides to the world he knew with the “Elixir” or the last phase.

Book I: Dune takes place in the world that Paul Atreides has always known. That is a world dominated by the Emperor Paddishah Shaddam IV, a seemingly feudal conglomerate of family houses vying for influence (his own House, the House Atreides is tangled in a vengeance feud against House Harkonnen) along with the Spacing Guild, who monopolise interplanetary travel, the sisters of the Bene Gesserit and the CHOAM, which resembles a stock organisation.

The conflict scene, with which the novel effectively opens, is a formal “Call to Adventure”, the first phase of the Hero’s Journey about which Campbell writes:

A blunder, apparently the merest chance, reveals an unsuspected world, and the individual is drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood. As Freud has shown, blunders are not the merest chance. They are the result of suppressed desires and conflicts. (Campbell, 45)

Although we do not see Paul Atreides go into Campbell's unsuspected world right away, this conflict takes form in the arrival of the Reverend Mother of the Bene Gesserit to Castle Caladan to speak about both the known and the unknown world. He then learns that he might be the long awaited Kwisatz Haderach, a male who might be able to gain the powers of her exclusively female order.

Campbell writes in a special section of his book dedicated to the description of the Supernatural aid that heroes receive, that "The first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man) who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass." (Campbell, 63). In this case, we see the Reverend Mother mark Paul as a survivor of the Gom Jabbar and "human" (people who can effectively suppress their instincts/feelings for specific purposes), as well as approving his continued training, which constitutes the basis of the power that he will later amass. It is also important to mention that Paul Atreides has already received this aid through his special training (both as Bene Gesserit and Mentat) and by being a part of the Bene Gesserit genetic program.

The first book progresses to the point where Paul's father, Duke Leto Atreides, takes over the fiefdom of the desert planet Arrakis by order of the Emperor. He is later killed in an invasion orchestrated by both Baron Harkonnen, arch-enemy of House Atreides, and the Emperor. Paul and his Bene Gesserit mother, Lady Jessica are exiled in the desert, thus effectively terminating the Call to Adventure phase with a consistent "Crossing of the First Threshold", or immersion in the unknown world which has been

heralded from the start of the novel: Arrakis, the desert planet inhabited mostly by the native Fremen tribes.

Book II: Muad'Dib is set in a world that is strange to the hero. In it, the hero is no longer royalty. The intergalactic Imperial rules no longer apply. He must survive the desert and not only learn the culture and the ways of the fierce desert-faring Fremen but become their leader and regain his Duchy. We have learned in the first book that they think that Paul might be their prophet (Mahdi). The events that lead from his arrival of the desert to the moment where he proves himself this prophet, are what Campbell would have called "Initiation" or "Road of Trials."

The trials that Paul Atreides undergoes are a series of rituals that he must complete in order to become one of the Fremen. He first must find the Fremen stronghold. Then, he must prove his worth. The transformation of the hero is signalled by his change of name from Paul Atreides to Paul Muad'Dib. That Paul has taken this Fremen name, marks the beginning of his life in the desert and the beginning of his accession to power.

An important twist to this conflict setting is that Frank Herbert tells his readers that the Bene Gesserit, through its Missionaria Protectiva (a faction of the order that specializes in creating religions for Bene Gesserit purposes), has in fact fabricated and set among the Fremen desert tribes these Prophecies. It is because of that that Paul, the hero, is accepted among the inhabitants of the desert. Jessica, the Bene Gesserit, is able to tap into the myth and allows the Fremen to believe that she and her son are the prophesised religious figures that must not only be accepted, but also obeyed.

A Fremen dissident who does not believe that Paul can fulfil the prophecy is killed. The importance of this is that he is the only Fremen who seems suspicious of the Lady Jessica and calls her "witch" in the same way the Duke's men would. However, no matter how correct his insight was, because it is Paul and Jessica's objective to manipulate them into reinstating Paul to his Duchy, the man is killed attempting to kill the prophet to be.

At the end of this conflict, Paul cries for him and for his loss of innocence. The Fremen dissident was his first kill. Also, crying reveals his divine nature to the Fremen accentuating the fact that his different culture places him in a pedestal above the natives. The tests continue until the time comes when he must learn to ride the sand worms, which effectively finishes Paul's initiation. All these elements constitute the road of trials that also strengthens Paul for his final challenge.

In the last book, titled *The Prophet*, Paul Atreides finds once more his former father's friend and companion Gurney Halleck, who produces a "Rescue from Without", calling Paul Atreides to avenge his father. Campbell has stated that preceding the phase he calls "The Crossing of the Return Threshold", the conflict that brings the hero back to his original world with life enhancing experience another phase, called "Atonement with the Father" must be completed.

This role is fulfilled by Gurney Halleck, who serves the function of transforming the hero from "child" to "father" and this is made evident when he is the first person to address him as "Duke of Arrakis". This scene redirects Paul's attention to the Empire from which he was exiled, and constitutes a call for him to return and make effective the title that is his birth-right: heir of the Ducal fiefdom of Arrakis and Caladan.

"The Crossing of the Return Threshold" takes place when he undergoes the spice agony, as his mother did to access the powers of a Reverend Mother. This allows Paul to look into the future, as well as to remember all the lives of his ancestors. He becomes the Fremen Mahdi because he is the Bene Gesserit Kwisatz Haderach, and these powers allow him both to survive the tests and the final confrontation.

To complete the story, in the phase Campbell calls "The Return", Paul storms the Capital of Arrakis and captures the Baron Harkonnen and the Emperor followed by the entirety of the Fremen tribes in order to found a new Empire. Then he overthrows the original regime that prevailed in the world he knew, exercising his revenge, and crowns

himself Emperor by demonstrating his control over the spice-melange, vital in the Dune universe. He also marries the imperial Princess Irulan so as to secure a claim to the throne.

About this moment, represented in the Fig. 1 diagram Campbell writes:

The effect of the successful adventure of the hero is the unlocking and release again of the flow of life into the body of the world. The miracle of this flow may be represented in physical terms as a circulation of food substance, dynamically as streaming of energy, or spiritually as a manifestation of grace. (32)

Though these events do not occur in *Dune*, the effects of Paul's delivering of the Elixir are felt throughout the novel through the different texts attributed to different characters that serve as epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter. Through them, we know that a holy war followed to convert the empire to the religion of Paul Muad'Dib. This is also shown in *Messiah* and the following sequels.

The miracle to which Campbell refers is represented in the surrendering of all the powers of the Empire to Paul given that he has gained the power (through the Fremen and through his spice agony) to destroy the production of spice, which is the life of the Empire. He has also manifested before the Bene Gesserit the "grace" of the Kwisatz Haderach, and fulfilled the Fremen prophecy of delivering them from Harkonnen, Imperial and Guild rule and granting them the freedom to spread over the whole universe.

However, it must not be forgotten that although this story represents the accession of Paul to the supreme power of the universe, that is, the control of spice, the Bene Gesserit is shown as a defeated power along with the Emperor, House Harkonnen and the Spacing Guild because their original design for the Kwisatz Haderach was tragically flawed. This undertone, although not central to the development of a successful monomythic plot, is instrumental to the understanding of the Bene Gesserit. They bred the Kwisatz Haderach, they prepared the people of Dune to receive a hero, and they gave Paul through the Lady

Jessica the necessary tools to overcome difficulty. In essence, the whole story is of Bene Gesserit design.

2. The Bene Gesserit

2.1. The Bene Gesserit. A Character Analysis.

Dune is first and foremost a monomythic story filled with characters that fulfil the archetypal roles described by Campbell. However, considering the Bene Gesserit a character includes further interpretation of *Dune* and adds tragedy to the heroic story. This tragedy is a frame story that is central to Herbert's commentary on human nature and the contrast between the effectiveness of a cold logical approach to human social relationships, with a clear goal, and more warm and sentimental approaches.

The story of the Bene Gesserit is a frame to the events described in *Dune*. In the beginning of the novel, it is an order of women only that had achieved great power. The most evident are the physical ones: the power to make their commands obeyed by any listener, super human observation capabilities, the power to discern whether a speaker is intentionally lying or not and their martial arts training along with the knowledge of several languages and the Reverend Mothers' ability to remember everything their female ancestors have lived.

The best proof of their political power rests in the fact that in the *Dune* universe being allied to the Bene Gesserit is a synonym of prestige. The Emperor has a truthsayer by his side, and his own wife is a Bene Gesserit adept who bears him only female children, thus forbidding him from having an heir to the throne.

Another example of their political influence is the Missionaria Protectiva, whose powers are attested by the existence the cult of the Mahdi, centred on the belief that the Lisan al-Gaib would come to save them from the horrors of the Imperial Rule and the oppression of the Spacing Guild and House Harkonnen. Also we might infer that this was done in the hopes that the Kwisatz Haderach might one day gain control of Dune.

Having such power over the Empire, and seemingly controlling it indirectly, the Bene Gesserit design a genetic program, in the hopes of producing the Kwisatz Haderach who will be able to look where they cannot and presumably achieve greater power for the sisterhood.

Then the Bene Gesserit appears to follow eugenic practices reminiscent of the ones practised by Nazi Germany and other nations around the time of the Second World War, although the element of xenophobia is replaced with a more objective sense of desirable genetic traits that they have found among the people that they believe are “human.” As the program reached its near completion, Lady Jessica was born.

Then come the events of Dune. Lady Jessica was ordered to mate with Duke Leto Atreides, and bear him only daughters, one of whom would marry the Baron Harkonnen’s heir and thus end the enmity between the houses and finally bring the Kwisatz Haderach into existence. Nonetheless, the Lady Jessica disobeyed her sisters and produced a male heir to the Duke, because she had fallen in love with him and because it meant so much to him.

Their child was called Paul Atreides. One day, the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam came to evaluate the boy and saw that it was possible that he was the Kwisatz Haderach. However, she did not act cautiously or take steps to further evaluate the possibility. And then, the Baron Harkonnen killed the Duke Leto and caused Jessica and her son to be exiled in the desert of the Planet Arrakis, the only source of the Spice that gave the Reverend Mothers their power. There, away from the influence of the Bene Gesserit, and because of Paul’s prolonged exposure to the spice, more signs began to show that he was the Kwisatz Haderach.

Although she realized this, the Lady Jessica was unable to contact the Bene Gesserit and therefore the order did not realize what had happened until Paul had become so powerful in his own right, that he became the Emperor and it was no longer possible to

control him. In the aftermath of the Imperial House's fall, Paul was so enraged at the Bene Gesserit for the way in which they refused to help his cause at the beginning that he considered them enemies, and not only deprived them of their influence on politics and religion, but also refused to participate in the sisterhood's program.

In this story, the Bene Gesserit reveals itself to be an independent character that can stand of its own despite the individual characters that belong to it. Peter Barry, referring to Aristotelian tragic character writes that a character is "revealed through action, which is to say through aspects of the plot." (Barry, 216) Indeed, the Bene Gesserit is revealed through the actions of its members because most of these actions are never their own, but rather the actions of an organization who commands them to do as they do from behind the shadows. In *Dune* the Bene Gesserit remains subject to the readers' imagination, but Herbert describes it thoroughly in his further work.

Thus, we can say that the seemingly all-powerful Bene Gesserit that has the power to control the Empire indirectly is our character, and they have set themselves the goal of producing the Kwisatz Haderach. Then, as *Dune* begins we see that the Lady Jessica chosen to give birth to Paul although she knew of the importance of providing the Atreides only female Daughters. She then meets Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam who in turn displays apparently uncharacteristic leniency towards Jessica. This sets a recognizable Hamartia which, "in tragic drama is often the product of the fatal character-defect which came to be known as the 'tragic flaw,'" (Barry, 216) as both Jessica and her Mentor show that the Bene Gesserit's is unable to remain completely detached from emotional decisions as is their ideal.

The element that follows is the *anagnorisis*, which Barry defines as "a moment in the narrative in which the truth of the situation is recognised by the protagonist." (Barry, 224) This takes place during Paul and Jessica's exile in the desert of Arrakis as she slowly, comes to the realization that her son is the Kwisatz Haderach. This culminates in the

moment in which he takes the test by surviving the spice agony and reveals to her mother the place where she cannot look, the ability to tell the future and gains the memories of his ancestors. “Through it all threaded the realization that her son was the Kwisatz Haderach, the one who could be many places at once. He was the fact out of the Bene Gesserit dream. And the fact gave her no peace.” (Herbert, 431)

The concluding element, called *Peripeteia*, or “fall from grace” (Barry, 217) occurs as the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam appears by the side of the emperor and Paul mocks their previous encounter and makes evident the fact that she no longer has any power. This element is finally sealed with Paul’s marriage to the Bene Gesserit Princess Irulan who symbolically represents the surrender of the Bene Gesserit. She enters a marriage everyone knows is false, and is thus utilized as the Bene Gesserit had utilized others before.

Barry writes, “Aristotle’s three categories are essentially to do with the underlying themes and moral purposes of stories...” (Barry, 218) and applying this logic to the story of the Bene Gesserit as a character we might infer that the moral purpose of its story is to weigh the sentimental and practical approaches to human relationships. However, the lesson appears to be more similar in nature to the one conveyed by the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. The Bene Gesserit had for so long adhered to the cold practical approach to produce their means for greater power, but a moment of sentimentality caused one of them to break the rules, consequentially causing their loss of the Kwisatz Haderach and costing them millennia of service to the men they empowered themselves.

3. The Bene Gesserit characters.

3.1. The Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam.

The Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam, hereafter referred to as RMG², is the Emperor's Truthsayer, and Lady Jessica's former teacher, but above all she is the proctor of the Bene Gesserit sent to the Atreides home world of Caladan to evaluate Jessica's son, Paul Atreides. Because of all of this, one can say that she is a highly influential character behind the scenes of *Dune*, primarily because of her backstage influence, which makes her the most ideal and viable representation of the Bene Gesserit sisterhood.

We first see RMG as she arrives to the ducal castle to perform the test on Paul. There, she is referred to as crone, and is described as "an old Crone" to whom his mother refers as "your reverence." (Herbert, 3) It is important to mention here that the Lady Jessica is in fact the Lady of Castle Caladan, and though she is not a Duchess she appears to be for all intents and purposes the lady of the house. Through Paul's eyes, Herbert makes it clear that it is strange that this old lady is treated with the respect Paul has known only for his family.

She is a menacing figure. She tells Paul of the test that he must undergo the day after. However, his mother has prepared Paul for this test. Throughout the years, as the scene in which he meditates on his bed shows, the Lady Jessica has given Paul the training that will allow him to survive a test ordinarily not administered to men.

The test itself is referred to by the seemingly esoteric name "Gom Jabbar" but explained with the scientific terms of "Crisis and observation." It is exercised using a box with which the Reverend Mother causes pain to Paul, who must endure it. The test is designed to determine whether Paul Atreides is human, i.e. to see if he is capable of

² I have chosen to use the acronym RMG as opposed to one of her names because in the *Dune* series, Frank Herbert makes it a point to always address her by her full name and title, and I believe this to be instrumental to her institution.

negating all “animal” impulses to remove his hand from the box. Surviving the test grants him the approval of the Reverend Mother, who sees in him the possibility (but nothing more) of being the Kwisatz Haderach.

RMG’s use of the word “human” is interesting in its instrumentality of showing the reader the seriousness of Bene Gesserit training and adherence to their restrictions. Because Paul Atreides has received some of their training, whether or not he is the Kwisatz Haderach, the boy must face the possibility of death. According to RMG’s logic, if he removes his hand from the box he is an animal and must die. However, removing the hand from pain may be considered a human reflex, very natural, and not many readers themselves would be able to maintain the hand in the box, even though there is an old woman at your back with a poisoned needle on your neck. Thus, we learn that RMG advocates that a Bene Gesserit represses instincts, therefore implying their reliance on thought and reflection.

RMG’s next action is the conversation with Lady Jessica, in which she demands an explanation to Jessica’s birthing of a son. She goads her into anger, although her main concern appears to be the preservation of the Atreides line, that is, of Paul’s life. The RMG is demonstrably the moral ambivalence of the Bene Gesserit brought to life. She is both caring and harsh, as the following lines exemplify.

The old woman’s voice softened. “Jessica, girl, I wish I could stand in your place and take your sufferings. But each of us must make her own path.”

“I know”

“You’re as dear to me as any of my own daughter, but I cannot let that interfere with duty”

“I understand... the necessity.”

“What you did Jessica, and why you did it – we both know. But kindness forces me to tell you there’s little chance your lad will be the Bene Gesserit Totality.

You musn’t let yourself hope too much.” (Herbert, 24)

This softer side, however uncharacteristic, show a softer side to the instructor that appears to be frankly stern.

The Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam does not appear for the majority of the story but we might say that her shadow remains following the hero. In the following chapters, the Duke and his advisors, who show themselves dismissive of the warnings delivered by the Reverend Mother, choose to disregard the signs of their coming defeat despite the counsel. Duke Leto himself says that these advertences should be taken “as a sign of love of your (Paul’s) mother,” and that they are not to be taken seriously. Though Leto might not consider Jessica as a Bene Gesserit because she proves to be on his side, he does not heed the words that came from the Reverend Mother.

Another significant factor is that the Baron Harkonnen is constantly worried about RMG abilities to tell whether one believes what he is telling. In Herbert’s terms, he’s afraid of the Truthsayer’s capabilities. This fear is so great that it dictates her actions and to some extent hinders them. He does not personally kill Paul and Jessica, and tells his servant Piter to dispose of them as he pleases, so that when the moment comes to face RMG he can honestly say that he does not know anything about it. Although the logic of this is dim (to go with the character), it says a lot of how much the emperor would trust the Reverend Mother, therefore reassuring the reader of the Bene Gesserit influence.

We see this fear come to life during the final scenes of the book, as the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam attempts to command the Emperor angrily and desperately, but her powers have ceased to function. In this scene, she represents the Bene Gesserit realising the failure of their plan. The boy she had once been able to test and hurt is now beyond her control, superior to herself in both psychic power and political influence. She is there, at the losing side, having failed to exert control over the Kwisatz Haderach she had hoped to control, and realizing that the Lady Jessica, her former student, has abandoned her too.

The Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam dies in *Dune: Messiah*, murdered by Paul's most trusted servant, Stilgar, having taken part in the conspiracy that managed to overthrow his government.

3.2. The Lady Jessica.

Lady Jessica serves many functions through *Dune*. She is presented as the dutiful concubine of Duke Leto Atreides, and a good natured actor in the developments that follow. Lady Jessica appears first to be a caring, protective mother figure, but the fact that time after time her endeavours end in tragedy cause her to harden as she later becomes a severe mother-figure. Because of this, Lady Jessica is the most developed female character in *Dune* as she undergoes the most transformations.

The Lady Jessica is best described by analysing her failures to comply with the Bene Gesserit order. Her main flaw, which constitutes not only her own tragic flaw, but the tragic flaw of the Bene Gesserit itself is that she allows herself to get sentimentally involved with people, which is uncharacteristic of other Bene Gesserit characters such as the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam, Princess Irulan and Lady Margot Fenring.

This tragic flaw is seen in the fact that she bore a son to Duke Leto Atreides to whom she was bound concubine and defied her specific orders from the Bene Gesserit. These were to produce only daughters to the Duke Leto Atreides. Her reason for doing this is that having a son meant so much to the Duke, and her love for him made it impossible for her to refuse him that. However, the Lady Jessica also admits to having sensed the possibility of bearing the Kwisatz Haderach.

Additionally, she has empowered her son by training him in the Bene Gesserit way. Although these two things are the greatest influences that she has on the plot, her character is a complicated one. While she attempts to use the powers that she has, by aiding the Duke in whatever way possible, she is also teaching and protecting her son whom, as the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam says, is the cause of the disgrace that unfolds before House Atreides.

The initial chapters of *Dune* give Jessica an air of servitude which are changed as the family arrives to Arrakis, where Lady Jessica is the first to experience the dangers of

the new world as she is attacked by the Shadout Mapes. Through this conflict, we learn that the Lady Jessica is well equipped to defend herself and is not the helpless servile creature that we see during the first chapters, and as readers, we get a taste of the power of the Bene Gesserit, which is not only centred in the supernatural abilities of the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam, but also include languages, and religious manipulation which she exerts on Mapes through deceit.

The confrontation with Yueh, which may be found on pages 57 to 64 consists of another example of the way in which Lady Jessica's powers as a Bene Gesserit are shown. The reader already knows that House Atreides will fall because of a traitor, and that he will not be found out. In it, Dr. Yueh struggles with the idea of hiding and revealing his real intentions to the Lady Jessica, and he does this by remembering the teachings of his dead Bene Gesserit wife. The following excerpt constitutes the end of the confrontation.

He nodded. "Of course." And he thought: *if only there were some way not to do this thing that I must do.*

Jessica dropped her arms, crossed to the hall door and stood there for a moment, hesitating, then let herself out. *All the time we talked he was hiding something, holding something back, she thought. To save my feelings, no doubt. He's a good man.* Again she hesitated, almost turned back to confront Yueh and drag the hidden thing from him. *But that would only shame him, frighten him to learn he's so easily read. I should place more trust in my friends.* (64)

What is achieved here, however, is a contrast between each of the character's emotions, as each experiences the powers of the Bene Gesserit and understands the magnitude of these powers. The last sentence is extremely powerful. Because it reveals Jessica's inner struggle between utter emotional detachment which would serve her own political goals in her wanting to turn back and drag the information out of Yueh. More than that, it shows that Jessica prefers to give weight to ethical values based on empathy, reflected in her choice to regard Yueh as a friend and trust him implicitly.

This trust constitutes yet another tragic flaw for Jessica, for if she had chosen to attack Yueh, she could have prevented the attack from House Harkonnen. Instead, she is cast into the desert, along with Paul. In the Desert, Jessica must contend with her pregnancy as well as her son, who blames her for his creation and for his adherence to the Bene Gesserit genetic program. It is also there that she learns that she is the daughter of her Duke's deadly enemy, the Baron Harkonnen.

The confrontation is the beginning of Lady Jessica's transformation. After the death of the Duke, and the awakening of Paul's latent abilities as the Kwisatz Haderach, she is presented to the reader in a different light. Paul Atreides thinks to himself after she has secured a place for them among the Fremen, but failed to shield him from the confrontation that kills Jamis, the Fremen who refused to believe that Paul was the Fremen prophet. "My mother is my enemy. She does not know it, but she is. She bore me; she trained me. She is my enemy." (Herbert, 259)

Shortly after, the Lady Jessica undergoes the test of the Spice, which transforms her into a Reverend Mother, making ground for yet another great mistake. Although in essence the test grants her the knowledge of what the Bene Gesserit is really about, that is, the spice that grants the Reverend Mothers their superior powers, she fails to inform the Fremen priestesses that she is with child, and thus gives her unborn daughter the same gift. That is, her unborn daughter will gain her mother's memories, and the memories of those before her. She will also gain the memories of Reverend Mother Ramallo, and all those before her, making her a Reverend Mother before she is even born.

Although the implications of this are discussed thoroughly in the Alia section of this discussion, it is important to the character of Jessica because it constitutes yet another tragic failure to comply with the standards of the Bene Gesserit. The Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam later accuses her of having produced an Abomination. So, by then, Lady Jessica has produced two children to who her order strongly objects.

Lady Jessica gains the social standing of a priestess also called Reverend Mother among the Fremen, which means that her counsel is valued. The next conflict that occurs to her is when Gurney Halleck is found once again, and he tries to kill her. Although this represents to her an instance in which the past calls to her, that is, the world which she originally knew has accused her much more than it has accused Paul, because Paul remained innocent, while Jessica became (in the eyes of Gurney Halleck, who represents the world ruled by the Emperor) guilty of the disgrace that befell Duke Leto.

Once the misunderstanding has been cleared and the plans advance towards Paul's gaining control over the Fremen tribes and the invasion of the city of Arrakeen, which would establish Paul as the rightful Duke of Arrakis, Paul decides to undergo the test of taking the Truthsayer's drug, which would allow him to look into the future at will. This is the same test that Jessica underwent to become a Reverend Mother, and it is the Lady Jessica herself the one to see this first. Seeing that Paul goes into a coma that lasts for weeks, Jessica keeps the Fremen councillors at bay by saying that Paul is in a spiritual Journey gathering his powers, and to end Paul's coma she calls for Chani.

It is important to say that she does not approve of Paul marrying Chani, and presumably forces her to be Paul's concubine.

What occurs then, is that Paul shows Jessica the full extent of the Powers of the Kwisatz Haderach. The most notable excerpt of the scene is probably the following.

“Paul said: “There is in each of us an ancient force that takes and an ancient force that gives. A man finds little difficulty facing that place within himself where the taking force dwells, but it's almost impossible for him to see into the giving force without changing into something other than man. For a woman, the situation is reversed.”

“These things are so ancient within us,” Paul said, “That they're ground into each separate cell of our bodies. We're shaped by such forces. You can say to yourself, ‘Yes, I see how such a thing may be.’ But when you look inward and

confront the ray force of your own life unshielded, you see your peril. You see that this could overwhelm you. The greatest peril to the giver is the force that takes. The greatest peril to the Taker is the force that gives. It's a easy to be overwhelmed by giving as by taking."

"And you, my son." Jessica asked, "Are you one who gives or one who takes?"

"I'm at the fulcrum," he said. (Herbert, 431)

This scene is of importance because it then reveals a basic stereotyping of gender and the androgynous quality which Paul has acquired due to Bene Gesserit influence.

Past this moment of tension, Jessica's words mark the ending scene as she refuses to comply with the Reverend Mother's order to control Paul and Jessica stands in defiance of her old teacher and her old ways. After refusing to comply with her old teacher (and the Bene Gesserit) she proceeds to console Chani and reassure her that although Paul is marrying the Emperor's daughter she should not doubt the love that he bears for her. Her ending line "While we, Chani, we who carry the name of concubine - history will call us wives." (Herbert, 591)

This line might be considered in two ways. One is that the Lady Jessica is manipulating Chani into staying with Paul as a gift to her son; the other that she has in reality been reconciled with the idea behind her own relationship with the Duke Leto Atreides, and thus comforting Chani and reassuring her of Paul's unwavering love.

In any case, we see the Lady Jessica finally come to terms with her sentimental nature, as she finally refuses to attempt to be the Bene Gesserit she is expected to be, and in doing so, she has placed her son on the throne, as she secured for Alia the religious throne that had been the Bene Gesserit's to manipulate through the Missionaria Protectiva.

3.3. Alia. The Child Reverend Mother.

An analysis of Alia might be as extensive as an analysis of Paul Atreides. Her influence over the events that occur during the second and third novel of the *Dune* series is far greater than her involvement in the first volume. In *Dune* Alia represents Lady Jessica's sin made flesh. She is the Abomination of the Bene Gesserit: that which should not be.

The reader knows that the Lady Jessica is pregnant with Alia during Lady Jessica's confrontation with Thufir Hawat, before they are cast in the desert. Paul learns of it as they begin their journey through the desert, using his newly discovered powers of prophesy. However, Alia's most important moment throughout the complete series takes place during the Lady Jessica's advancement in power. Jessica is pregnant with Alia when she takes the water of life, spice essence which would awaken the memories of her own ancestors and which would also allow them to receive the memories of the Reverend Mother Ramallo. Because of this, Alia receives all this knowledge at the same time, and the Old Reverend Mother advises against it.

Although the talk about abomination does not come until the end of the book, the Fremen notice the difference long before that. She has learned to speak upon birth, and several of her characteristics, such as vocabulary and sense of humour, are those of an adult while she has the appearance of a child. She remembers things that she should not remember, and she is able to understand the jokes of adults. This unsettles the Fremen.

Harah, an attendant of Jessica's and Paul's, advises that the Lady Jessica let it be known among the people that she is not a child. That she was born a Reverend Mother. Although this is not seen, this might be what sparks the beginning of the cult of Alia described during *Messiah* and which settles the power base for Alia to take over before the events in *Children of Dune*.

In the battle that kills Paul's first child, Alia is abducted and brought to the presence of the Emperor, the Baron Harkonnen and the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam. Her

conduct there, however, is that of a bitter enemy. The Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam then proceeds to confront her. In this exchange we understand more about Alia's power and the way that she is presented. She has mystical powers unknown to the others, and the Bene Gesserit Reverend Mother struggles to keep them secret. However, Alia's powers are greater than the Reverend Mother's because of her Atreides ascendancy, and therefore, may be understood as magical. Nonetheless, the accusation that she is an abomination is significant.

She could be considered an abomination because she has not been tested with the Gom-Jabbar as Paul was. She has not received the training of the Bene Gesserit sisters and therefore she cannot control herself as the others can. Is this reason enough to kill her? This is another instance of the Bene Gesserit's moral ambivalence. It is of no consequence that she is the daughter of Jessica. She is viewed as a dangerous threat that must be eliminated.

The fact that she uses the Gom-Jabbar to kill the Baron Harkonnen is notable because it reflects once more the Bene Gesserit view on humanity. Humanity is about control and repression of instincts, which the Baron not only fails to display, but instead displays the complete opposite and is killed by the same test that Paul survived. However, it is of equal importance to note that the same beastly Baron Harkonnen is who will later possess Alia, drive her to madness and cause her to commit suicide.

Alia's birth represents the third and final tragic experience of the Lady Jessica before she seemingly disappears in *Messiah*. However, in work beyond *Dune* Alia's importance increases as she is shown to inherit the regency of the Empire after her brother's death and furthers Herbert's commentary about the psychic powers' differences between its male and female manifestations. Nonetheless, in *Dune*, her presence and condemnation seems to accentuate the importance that the Bene Gesserit place in their training and their way of forming Reverend Mothers. An untrained Reverend Mother is an

abomination, which focuses on the importance of their teaching rather than on their apparent quest for power.

3.4. Princess Irulan.

She is the narrator, and the character through which most is learned about events after the end of *Dune*'s actual story. Princess Irulan in *Dune* represents the trophy wife; however, she does not represent love, but the necessity of the old Regime. She is mostly known because of her repeated appearance in the Epigraphs and her description of very short scenes providing either background or future information.

While the Princess Irulan is a result of the Bene Gesserit's manipulation of the Imperial household, as seen in previous discussion, it is evident that she is the element which the Bene Gesserit had hoped to use to control a future possible Emperor of their choosing. She stops his father objections by saying "For this I was trained, father." This ambivalent statement speaks both of her resignation to her fate, and of confidence in her abilities to manipulate the situation in her/the Bene Gesserit's interest.

The following conversation that follows is revealing.

"Do you know so little of my son?" Jessica whispered. "See that princess standing there, so haughty and confident. They say she has pretensions of a literary nature. Let us hope she finds solace in such things; she'll have little else." A bitter laugh escaped Jessica. "Think on it, Chani: that princess will have the name, yet she'll live as less than a concubine -- never to know a moment of tenderness from the man to whom she's bound. While we, Chani, we who carry the name of concubine -- history will call us wives (Herbert, 474).

As his father before him, Paul shows the perception that the choosing of a wife is merely political, while the concubine is the chosen beloved one. However, it is of some importance that this wife is Bene Gesserit, because with the marriage of the Princess Irulan, we see the Bene Gesserit retrenching after their tragic defeat and preparing to manipulate the rising power.

However, Princess Irulan has already been characterised in the epigraphs appearing in every chapter. There we see that she was written many books, we might understand these as evidence of Irulan's attempts at seeking solace from the lack of love Paul promises her.

Irulan can be said to represent the Bene Gesserit entering into the new order of things. Her marriage to Paul constitutes the tragic fall from the former power that they had had in the previous Regime, and in the new one, the Bene Gesserit have a reduced influence as their powers pale in comparison to the powers of Paul. Unlike Irulan's mother, who bore the Emperor no male heir out of choice, Irulan herself would bear no imperial heir because of Paul's choice. The political power shifts from female to male.

4. Conclusion

The previous discussion has been written with the objective of providing the reader with a sense that the Bene Gesserit is a character involved in *Dune* which is identified by the actions of characters that are members of the sisterhood. Its final objective has been to provide the reader with the characteristics documented on in-text evidence that agrees with some of the previously made scholarly work.

One of the things that this reading challenges is Reid's claim that the women in *Dune* have no goals of their own. The Bene Gesserit do have goals of their own, even if they are limited to a quest for power and influence on which they are quite successful until the moment of their own demise.

The element of tragedy however, is present mostly in the eventual fates of the major Bene Gesserit characters. First, we see the Revered Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam fall from her power position as advisor to the Emperor. We also see Jessica's failures to comply with the politically motivated standards of the Bene Gesserit develop a plot in which her sisterhood ends up losing the influence they had gained because of their emotionally restrictive politics.

Jessica's Bene Gesserit faults culminate in the production of Paul Atreides, a Kwisatz Haderach that not only the Bene Gesserit fails to control, but who also turns out to control them by seizing the throne and marrying the Princess Irulan. Furthermore, because of her love for Duke Leto, the Lady Jessica produces another untimely child, Alia, who gains the powers and knowledge of a Bene Gesserit reverend mother without the restrictions that are characteristic of a Bene Gesserit. Without these restrictions, she is regarded as a dangerous abomination.

These facts should provide an understanding that the Bene Gesserit represent Herbert's exploration of the necessary clash between over-rational and emotional approaches to human relationships. On the one hand he presents us with an organization

that utilizes a rational approach with the objective of manipulating genes and the education of powerful people. On the other hand, we see the work they have done lose direction because of Jessica's tendency to create emotional attachments. This furthers the claim that the Bene Gesserit's thematic function in *Dune* is to morally confront reason against feelings; from the Bene Gesserit point of view, experience teaches that reason should have absolute control over feeling.

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