



Dune: A Leadership Critique

Berfe Yaşar

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WRITTEN BY

Berfe Yaşar

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AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347

ULUS, BEŞİKTAŞ

İSTANBUL / TÜRKİYE

TRT WORLD LONDON

PORTLAND HOUSE

4 GREAT PORTLAND STREET NO:4

LONDON / UNITED KINGDOM

TRT WORLD WASHINGTON D.C.

1819 L STREET NW SUITE 700 20036

WASHINGTON DC

researchcentre.trtworld.com

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Introduction

The fictional universe of Frank Herbert's novel series, set in the distant future, can evoke any historical period. In *Dune*, the intricate interaction of diverse subjects, including politics, religion, ecology and power, demonstrates that this universe is as politically and culturally complex as ours. In this universe, the potential influence of religion on politics, society and individual life is examined through the emergence and evolution of a prominent leadership figure. Despite the focus on religion, Herbert illustrates how belief systems, in general, can be employed as a tool to influence societal motivation and indirectly impact leaders' strategic decisions.

The question of whether *Dune* is a story of heroism or the catastrophe that befalls a society is a significant one. Herbert conveys his cautionary message through the internal and external transformation of Paul, the protagonist of this fictional universe. Herbert issues a cautionary message to the reader, advising them to exercise discernment and critical thinking regarding religious authorities and leaders. As evidenced in the fictional narrative, when Paul (the messianic leader of *Dune*) assumes a position of authority, he not only consolidates his hold but also expands his influence, resources, and control. This story does not portray a heroic figure but aligns with historical real-world accounts.

A contemporary perspective on the *Dune* universe reveals a portrayal of space as an interplanetary realm, a power source based on a substance known as spice, the prohibition of advanced technology in the utilisation of tools and equipment, and a human form that has undergone significant transformation due to its advanced capabilities. Nevertheless, despite these alterations, it can be argued that its enduring appeal is the fundamental nature of humanity, which has remained constant throughout history. Consequently, at the heart of any critique of leadership lies our intrinsic desire to control or submit to authority. By examining the world in which we live, we can gain insight into the struggles of those who seek power in *Dune* and the individuals who create an environment conducive to this end.

Plot Summary

Dune is set in the distant future, where a galactic emperor rules noble houses. Emperor Shaddam IV has seized control of the desert planet Arrakis (also known as Dune) from the Harkonnens and, as part of a political intrigue, has given it to Duke Leto, head of the House of Atreides. On the surface, this appears to be a blessing in disguise, for while the climate on Dune is frighteningly hostile, the desert is of inestimable strategic importance as the only place in the galaxy where a precious substance known as spice is mined. However, this assignment is a trap, and Duke Leto is killed.

The duke's wife, Jessica, and son, Paul, flee into the desert, survive and seek refuge with the local Fremen tribe. The native Fremen believe that Paul may be the Mahdi, or Messiah, foretold in ancient prophecies and believed to be coming for years. Leading the Fremen to avenge his father's death, Paul seizes control of the spice and attempts to take the imperial throne. In Dune, the spice is the primary power source, and as David Lynch's Dune Baron Vladimir Harkonnen declares, "He who controls Arrakis controls the spice, and he who controls the spice controls the universe."

Religion as a Means of Advancing Political Agendas

Paul is a courageous and idealistic young man, resolute in his determination to do what he believes is right and to combat evil. When he joins the Fremen, he refutes the notion that he is the Lisan al-Gaib, the voice from the outworld, as the locals have referred to him for centuries. In one of his visions of the future, he envisions the legions of fanatics burning and plundering the universe in the name of their prophet, the Mahdi, on his way to a potential destiny. He is aware that if he were to confirm this belief of the Fremen, it would result in a holy war and the deaths of millions of people. He states, "Surely, I cannot choose that way." (Herbert, 1965).

In encouraging Paul to exploit religious beliefs for survival, Jessica informs him that the Fremen "are superstitious people. If we are to survive, it would be best to accommodate their legends." (Herbert, 1965). Paul offers a critique of his mother and resists assuming the role of the Mahdi that the Fremen anticipates. Ultimately, however, he assumes this role, thereby eschewing the necessity of balancing the beliefs of the local population. In this way, he will be able to mobilise the Fremen people behind him for common goals and benefit from their war power. Herbert illustrates the profound impact of religion on human decision-making and orientation through Paul and the Fremen. He simultaneously demonstrates the potential vulnerability of this influence, highlighting its capacity to discern the unconscious motives of the

masses and to be exploited by those in pursuit of power. Herbert's critique of religion as a political instrument is interwoven with his examination of leadership.

We observe Paul's transition from a youthful individual initially reluctant to assume the role of saviour to a pragmatic leader who manipulates the Fremen people's faith to protect his political objectives. He gains the trust of the Fremen by presenting himself as their long-awaited messiah, incites the Fremen to revolt on Arrakis, and subsequently assumes control of the planet. In the holy war initiated by Paul, known as 'the one who will lead us into paradise' in the Fremen messianic legend, sixty billion people were slaughtered. Paul did not assume the risk of sacrificing his power for moral considerations; on the contrary, he proclaimed his power to the universe almost as if he were saying, "sacrifice them for me." Paul's decision is merely one example of historical abuse of power.

This war, which forms part of Herbert's critique of religious and political authority, demonstrates how the domination of politics by religion can become an unstoppable and uncontrollable destructive force. This situation calls to mind Martin Luther King's cautionary words: "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool." (A knock at

Midnight) In the Dune series, Paul, with his considerable political and religious authority, ultimately assumes the role of a dictator, compelling the entire universe to submit to his rule and imposing his religious beliefs upon them. The concentration of such immense power in a single individual inevitably leads to the abuse of authority. Herbert articulates this concept through a proverbial saying of the Bene Gesserit: "When religion and politics travel in the same cart, the riders believe nothing can stand in their way." (Herbert, 1965).

However, this is an illusion, as it is challenging to regulate such influence, both for the people and for

the leader himself. A leader who guides their people through deceit ultimately harms not only those they lead but also themselves. Indeed, Paul becomes unable to control the religion he leads and states that he cannot disassociate himself from "this damnable myth I have become." (Herbert, 1969). Acknowledging the nuanced portrayal of the protagonist Paul by Herbert is significant. Unlike other protagonists who do not question themselves, Paul is depicted as a hero who ultimately recognises his fallibility and the inability of a leader to control the consequences of their actions.

Transforming into a Leader

In assuming the role of messiah, Paul undergoes a transformation from an idealistic young man with fears and flaws into a confident leader who conceals them. As a young nobleman, he informs his father that "men follow you willingly and love you." In response, Duke Leto states, "My propaganda corps is one of the finest." (Herbert 1965). His father's response disconcerts Paul, as he desires to believe that his people follow him out of love. However, when confronted with the realities of fighting against other forces, he chooses to achieve his leadership through fearmongering. As he matures as a leader, Paul discards the value of human life that he learns from his father. He says, "Mercy is a word I no longer understand" (Herbert, 1969).

In this process, it is evident that while Paul's knowledge and awareness increase, his emotional awareness and humanity reverses. The transformation of this naive, idealistic young man into a leader, who pursues his interests and instils fear when necessary, demonstrates the corrupting effect of the will to power. To such an extent that, when questioned by his followers, he distanced himself from himself to the point of stating that he was Kwisatz Haderach and that there was no need to seek other explanations.

Herbert challenges the conventional wisdom that power itself is corrupting. He posits that the corrupting effect of the pursuit and acquisition of power is not merely a consequence but rather a defining characteristic of the pathology of desiring power. This suggests that those who are already corrupt are drawn to power. Herbert says: "All governments suffer a recurring problem: Power attracts pathological

personalities. It is not that power corrupts but that it is magnetic to the corruptible. Such people tend to become drunk on violence, a condition to which they are quickly addicted." (Herbert 1985). Consequently, Paul is not corrupted by his acquisition of power; rather, his aspiration to rule reflects his proclivity and vulnerability to corruption.

Is Leadership Innate or Acquired?

The question of whether leadership is an innate ability or an ability that can be acquired is a topic of considerable debate. Herbert postulates a leader with more intricate characteristics than the conventional hero. The Bene Gesserit sisters started a multi-century selective breeding programme to produce a human being. Paul is the product of this programme, a genetically enhanced individual with superhuman abilities known as the Kwisatz Haderach. It can, therefore, be argued that Paul is a born leader, although it is also evident that the fulfilment of this ancient prophecy is dependent upon the rigorous education he has received. Paul's character is shaped by the efforts of those who have educated him, including his mother, father, and teachers. Herbert suggests that it is not Paul's birth that is the source of his character's power but rather his efforts. Consequently, the protagonist of Dune must develop his abilities to become a leader.

He acquired the ability to master his consciousness and dominate other minds from his mother, a Bene Gesserit priestess. He also studied Mentat, whereby he learned to analyse large amounts of data rapidly and efficiently. He is additionally a courageous and proficient warrior,

trained as a swordsman. This comprehensive training has prepared him to become Kwisatz Haderach. The genetic programme of the Bene Gesserit and missionary work further support his endeavour.

For centuries, the Bene Gesserit Order disseminated their beliefs throughout the empire, influencing the population to align with their political objectives. The belief in Lisan-al Gaib, the saviour that the Fremen were

awaiting, was also developed as part of this mission. Therefore, Paul's emergence as a hero results from the Bene Gesserit mission, representing a saviour awaited by the Fremen. When discussing the emergence of a leader, it is essential to consider the role of various factors behind the messianic figure. Paul is not a self-made man. The fact that Herbert constructs his story with various participants who guide his protagonist emphasises that a leader does not emerge alone.

Hidden Imperialism under the Name of Emancipation

The Bene Gesserit missionaries deliberately cultivated the superstitions of the Fremen, intending to render them susceptible to manipulation. Herbert's portrayal of the Fremen's faith as an organised religion illustrates the need to examine the reliability of prophecies and beliefs critically. Paul's character is quoted as follows: "When law and duty are one, united by religion, you never become fully conscious, fully aware of yourself. You are always a little less than an individual." (Herbert 1965). This argument elucidates the peril inherent in transforming religion into an instrument of imposition by a leader, which effectively deprives the individual of the capacity for independent thought, subjugating them to a state of passive compliance. Paul realises "how Stilgar had been transformed from the Fremen naib to a creature of the Lisan al-Gaib, a receptacle for awe and obedience. It was a lessening of the man." (Herbert, 1965) The disturbing resonance of Paul's proselytising as a living holy leader in a society susceptible to religious fanaticism is evident in the deterioration of the Fremen's dignity as individuals and as a society, accompanied by a decline in their capacity for discernment and critical thinking.

However, Paul intended to emancipate the Fremen from the oppression of external forces. Indeed, this is what occurred. The planet Dune exerts influence over other powers in the galaxy, but this time, it is conquered from within under Paul's control. This time, the oppression is even more severe because it is such bondage that the Fremen are unaware of it. When Paul assumes the imperial throne, it seems like a victory for the Fremen, but it is a tragedy. Herbert's narrative does not conform to the conventional pattern of a heroic

journey. Instead, it presents a cautionary tale that underscores the importance of exercising caution and critical thinking when evaluating the actions of those in positions of authority. Herbert issues a stark warning through the voice of one of his characters (Liet Kynes's father, an idealistic ecologist who strives to transform Dune into a paradise): "No more terrible disaster could befall your people than for them to fall into the hands of a Hero." (Herbert, 1965).

The imperialist mentality that underpins the promise of freedom is not a phenomenon that is alien to either history or the political present. Herbert presents the colonial mentality in several different guises. Despite his civilised and conciliatory demeanour, Paul is a colonialist in the same vein as the rude and impulsive Harkonnens. Like the Harkonnens, he views spices and Fremen as resources to be monopolised and controlled. However, the distinction between them lies in the method employed. Paul favours plundering the people he exploits, not as adversaries but as leaders who follow him of their own volition.

Caution Against Charismatic Leaders

"This, then, was one of my themes for Dune: Don't give over all of your critical faculties to people in power, no matter how admirable those people may appear to be. Beneath the hero's facade, you will find a human being who makes human mistakes. Enormous problems arise when human mistakes are made on the grand scale available to a superhero."

(This essay was originally published in the July 1980 issue of Omni Magazine. <https://vasil.ludost.net/dunegenesis.pdf>)

Herbert argues that even if one places hope and trust in a leader, it is important to remember that they are human and, therefore, susceptible to making mistakes. Herbert cautions against surrendering one's critical thinking and life to leaders. The consequences of a mistake by a leader with power and authority are likely to be magnified by the unquestioning obedience of their followers to their plan of action. Herbert's critique extends (Herbert, 1965) (Herbert, Dune Messiah, 1969) beyond the leaders to encompass the followers who offer unquestioning support. When Paul orders the Fremen to commence the war, no individual, including Stilgar, the former leader of the Fremen, asserts that his people have no intention of overthrowing the emperor or engaging in a galactic conflict. Instead, they merely seek to live freely without their lands being plundered. Paul's word is right for them because, although he is not a god, he is not a man either. If an individual ascribes superiority to another, whether divine or not, this will result in surrendering their judgment to that person.

Paul even accuses the Fremen of trying to lure him into "the wild jihad, the religious war he felt he should avoid at any cost" (Herbert, 1965). Paul did not become a hero alone but because of a collaborative effort involving the Fremen. The notion that leaders are solely produced by their people or are the product of their design is fallacious. It is the masses who have the real power and domination, and therefore, it would be unfair to hold Paul alone responsible for the holy war that is ravaging the entire universe. Herbert states in the book that Paul is the sleeping giant that the Fremen will awaken for their brutal religious war against the universe. (Herbert, 1965)

Indeed, it is possible to evaluate human nature from two distinct perspectives. On the one hand, Paul represents the desire to rule and the greed for power. On the other hand, the Fremen represent a tendency to be ruled and obeyed. When a community places its trust in the wisdom of a leader and allows them to determine what is right on their behalf, it is ultimately aspiring to a state of slavery, regardless of the justification provided. Despite Paul's promise to save the Fremen from exploitation, he cannot save them from themselves. Although Paul did not create the conditions that would give him power and dominance, he stopped proclaiming that they were a mistake and instead exploited the favourable circumstances that had already arisen to seize power.

Conclusion

Herbert highlights the reciprocal nature of this relationship by expressing his criticism of leadership through leaders and those who provide them with this position. In this way, he conveys that one should be cautious not only of the desire for power and the desire to dominate but also of the inclination to obey and abdicate total authority to another individual. In essence, Herbert's work reminds us of maintaining a sceptical outlook about human nature. This implies that, while attempting to discourage unquestioning allegiance, one must exercise caution in judgment. In

this way, he encourages the reader to reflect deeply on the leader they follow and the underlying motives for doing so. Indeed, Herbert's insights into leadership remain pertinent in the present era because at the heart of this critique is unchanging human nature itself.

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