

The Deconstruction of the Masculine Norm and Structures of Patriarchy in Frank Herbert's *Dune* Book Series

A Gender-and Sex-based Analysis of Frank Herbert's *Dune* Books

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Hannes Oliebos

Student number: 01811773

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Gert Buelens

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Overview of Frank Herbert's *Dune* Book Series:

I offer an overview of the book series, mainly because I commonly refer to the *Dune* books, not by their title, but by using their number within the chronological order of the series,

Book 1: *Dune* (1965)

book 2: *Dune Messiah* (1969) (referred to as 'Herbert, Messiah' when cited as source)

book 3: *Children of Dune* (1976) (referred to as 'Herbert, Children' when cited as source)

book 4: *God Emperor of Dune* (1981) (referred to as 'Herbert, God Emperor' when cited as source)

book 5: *Heretics of Dune* (1984) (referred to as 'Herbert, Heretics' when cited as source)

book 6: *Chapterhouse Dune* (1985) (referred to as 'Herbert, Chapterhouse' when cited as source)

Introduction

Frank Herbert's *Dune* is lauded by many as a masterpiece (Mack 40) (Allatt 61) (Manlove 79), or even as "the key science fiction novel of the decade" (Roberts, History 338). The first novel won the Nebula Award for Best Novel in 1965 and the 1966 Hugo Award (SFADB) and is one of "the best-selling science-fiction novels ever" (Freierman 7) (Mack 40). The *Dune* book series, consisting of six books in total^{1 2}, has become highly influential, garnering "enduring appeal" (Mack 40), and popularity (Stratton 307) (Allatt 1) (Kněžková 5), (with a major movie adaptation on the way (Villeneuve).

Dune is set in the far future and starts out with a feudal interstellar empire in place, consisting of planetary fiefs (or noble Houses) and various economic, political, and religious organisations vying for power and control (primarily) over the planet Arrakis (also called Dune). This conflict and the impact on humanity develop over thousands of years and in all six books.

What I initially picked up on in the books is its contentious gender-sex dimension and the progression of themes related to it through the six books, with a particularly jarring juxtaposition between books 1-4 and 5-6 that elicits an interesting gender- and sex-based discussion.

"A vast majority of critical discourse [on *Dune*] in journals tends to focus on ecology and feminism³" (Allatt 50) (Stratton 307). While the notion of ecology in *Dune* is certainly interesting, I too will construct a sex-and gender-based analysis of *Dune* approaching the books using feminist frameworks. While I will not specifically focus on the distinction in my analysis of *Dune*, I do want to make clear the difference between sex which refers "to biological differences, and gender [which refers] to social differences, [and] what are often called gender roles" (Duguid et al. 493) (Beauvoir

¹ Book 1: *Dune*, book 2: *Dune Messiah*, book 3: *Children of Dune*, book 4: *God Emperor of Dune*, book 5: *Heretics of Dune*, book 6: *Chapterhouse Dune*

² The *Dune* book series has later spun out in nineteen novels, with more on the way, set in the Duniverse (Dune universe) and co-authored by Herbert's son. I do not engage with these later books and concern myself only with Frank Herbert's original run.

³ Feminism: "the range of social movements, political movements, and ideologies that aim to define and establish the political, economic, personal, and social equality of the sexes" (Oxford English Dictionary, Feminism) (Ritzer en Ryan 223).

94). Keep in mind that these are (often) intertwined since “sex inequality takes the form of gender; moving as a relation between people” (Butler xii).

That being said, my approach to *Dune* differs a lot from the bulk of past research on the novels. Most research regarding *Dune* makes assumptions based on the socio-cultural context of the books’ publication, between 1965 and 1985, claiming that *Dune*: “[reflects] the values of mid-century America” (Evans 47), which, according to them, “more than likely influenced his depiction of women” (Evans 51): “The twentieth century saw an acceleration of the impact of feminism, working to undermine male authority and [destabilise] the status quo ... [which led to] a crisis in masculinity in mid-century America” (Bassett 86) (Evans 4). Despite these social changes, many researchers seem to believe and claim that Herbert resists them: Adam Roberts, for example, states that *Dune* is an “old-fashioned” (29) “novel built around a sense of stepping backwards” (31), supported by “the novel’s traditional, patriarchal societal structures and attitudes” (Evans 25). This, allegedly, leads to the portrayal of women “in equally traditionally patriarchal terms” (Evans 25). “Critics who do address the treatment of gender in *Dune*, notably Jack Hand, Miriam Youngerman Miller, Susan McLean, and Adam Roberts, [among others]” (Evans 21), adopt the same line of thinking. On the basis of this, they imply, or state, that the books “appeal to male chauvinism and misogyny” (Evans 3), and/or “exhibit a lot of what you can call benign sexism⁴” (Evans 32), showing a “gender disparity” (Carrasco 43), caused, according to some, by a general “fear of sexuality [and] women” (McLean 154).

I reject this reading of *Dune* as it is generally based on only the first book of the series, and assumes a position wherein every element that seems regressive or female-unfriendly is taken at face value due to its patriarchal context. In my research, I discern similar traditional aspects, mainly patriarchal elements and a general masculine norm, but I pair the discussion of these with a broader perspective, taking into account all six *Dune* books. The key component that supports my differing take is in the form of the Bene Gesserit Sisterhood, functioning as the key subversive element of the

⁴ I will adhere to the definition of sexism as: “prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, (typically) against women, on the basis of sex” (Oxford English Dictionary, sexism).

patriarchy and the general masculine norm in *Dune*. Past research has acknowledged the presence of (these) strong female characters in *Dune*, but overlook this aspect treating it as an early depiction of what “has become a stereotype [in science fiction] today” (Evans 3). What supports reading *Dune* as progressive and not as something that supports oppressive male dominance, is its gradual progression towards a stronger female presence, which is fully realised in books 5 and 6 of *Dune*, thus coincidentally informing the preceding *Dune* books.

The purpose of my thesis is to find out how the masculine norm in *Dune* is integrated and established, and how it is subverted and later inverted and replaced by a (more) feminine norm. I attempt to discern how the often-discussed notion of patriarchy is realised, which elements point towards *Dune* as being regressive and/or sexist, and which elements resist this. I am interested to establish how a more feminine norm is worked towards, what this means for a sex- and gender-based analysis of *Dune*, and how the Bene Gesserit play a role in this. Succinctly, I aim to answer the following research question(s):

How does the *Dune* book series conceptualise its supposed traditional gender norms (favouring men), and how does the concept of patriarchy contribute to this? Which elements resist such a reading, and how do these concepts progress through the narrative? How does this affect a sex- and gender-based analysis of the books?

Because many researchers suppose that “*Dune* reflects the patriarchal views of women so common in mid-century America ... critics have felt less need to elaborate on an aspect of the novel that seems relatively self-evident” (Evans 21). This is what makes my thesis unique, since it is exactly these self-evident elements that I highlight, proving they are more nuanced, or just simply different than what they initially appear to be. It also supports my argument that past critics of *Dune* are either misinformed, or decide to ignore elements that resist the patriarchal, regressive views, since they initially assume these elements are present in *Dune* due to the books’ sociocultural context of publication, and because they mostly only focus on the first books⁵.

⁵ This is the case in all of the following sources: (Mack) (Stratton) (Allatt) (Senior) (Viberg) (DiTommaso) (Roberts)

I deconstruct *Dune*, and, as a result, past research on *Dune*, adding nuance to the discussion, while highlighting aspects of *Dune*, primarily the Bene Gesserit and books 5 and 6 of the series, which have thus far, quite surprisingly, been disregarded or quickly glossed over, in contrast to books 1 through 4. In doing this, I attempt to add to a larger conversation, not only on *Dune*, but on the science fiction genre and how it has depicted gender and sex elements in the past, and how it has implemented these elements in imagined futures. With this, my analysis has the potential to contribute to even broader sex-and gender-based discourse as the books can help understand and inform current (and past) discussions on issues of gender and sex, while their fictionality has the potential to offer new ideas within such a discussion.

The methodology of this thesis is one of close reading, naturally of Frank Herbert's six *Dune* books, and of secondary sources that help support my analysis of said books. I primarily focus on elements concerning gender and sex, and general ideological and socio-political aspects. To offer a sex-and gender-based analysis of *Dune* I use multiple feminist frameworks, concepts, and theories. Some of these originated after the publication of the *Dune* books, which means that I am working a little anachronistically. However, I decided not to constrain myself to feminist theory of Herbert's time (the mid-to-late twentieth century), because I believe it would be irresponsible to ignore more current gender-and sex-based research that could prove useful to help understand *Dune*'s realisation of sex- and gender elements. In addition, "fiction has always been a useful tool to discuss more radical, possibly progressive, ideas" (Johns 175). "Feminist science fiction presents blueprints for social structures that allow women's words to counter patriarchal myths" (Barr 7). Only adhering to (feminist) ideas of Herbert's time would lead to an incomplete and limited version of *Dune*'s analysis, specifically because there are elements in *Dune* that supersede and appear more progressive than the (feminist) theories available at *Dune*'s time of publication.

Throughout my thesis I regularly use the term 'regressive' as an overarching term to denote and refer to the more traditional, conservative approaches to sex and gender, and concepts of chauvinism, misogyny, sexism, etc. It is used to indicate how *Dune* uses archaic depictions of sex and gender. In contrast, what is meant by 'progressive' are elements that "hint at social reform"

(Oxford English Dictionary, progressive), and which relate specifically to favourable aspects of (contemporary) feminist discourse, an attempt to indicate (aspects of) gender equality, and in general implications that point towards a more favourable position and portrayal of women.

Most frameworks I work with are used to track down and offer (counter-)arguments to the alleged patriarchal, male chauvinistic, ‘regressive’ elements and later the matriarchal, ‘feminine’/feminist, ‘progressive’ elements. The most important frameworks are the following: Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1970), Raewyn Connell’s *Masculinities* (1993), Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949), and Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990).

In general, the outline of my thesis mirrors the juxtaposition between, and the progression from and to, books 1-4 and books 5-6 of *Dune*. The first chapter deals almost exclusively with books 1-4, chapter 2 (about the B.G.) involves all six books, and chapter 3 primarily focuses on books 5-6, but does connect most arguments with chapter 1 of my thesis and books 1-4 of *Dune*:

- 1) Establishing the Masculine Norm and Structures of Patriarchy in Frank Herbert’s *Dune* book series (books 1-4)

The first chapter, focuses solely on books 1-4, consists of two parts, and leans into assumptions made by other researchers claiming *Dune* is regressive and/or sexist due to its depiction of patriarchy (first part) and supposed adherence to a general masculine norm and traditional gender role norms (second part).

- 2) The Bene Gesserit Turning Point

The second chapter functions as a divider between the analysis that mainly considers books 1-4 (chapter 1), and the one primarily focusing on books 5-6 (chapter 3). This chapter reflects how the Bene Gesserit are the main subversive element in books 1-4, are one of the main contributors to the rift in the narrative and are the catalyst of the ideological change within the narrative from a masculine norm and patriarchal society to a feminine norm and matriarchal society, thus changing the gendered reading of the *Dune* franchise and subverting the notion of *Dune*’s perception as supposedly regressive and/or sexist.

3) The Construction of a Feminine Norm and Structures of Matriarchy (books 5-6)

In the third and final chapter, I give an overview of how the overall plot informs how *Dune* progresses from a masculine to a feminine norm (contrasting books 1-4, with books 5-6), and how *Dune* moves away from a depiction of patriarchy, to what might be a full-fledged matriarchy. I also focus on the conflict between the B.G. and their main (female) adversaries (in books 5-6), (the Honored Matres), indicating how the conflict mirrors *Dune*'s ideological change, and how this affects the entire series. My thesis closes with a summary of my overall findings concerning my research question and thesis statement, my limitations, and possibilities for future research.

Succinctly, in doing this research, I intend to point out how *Dune* features but also resists (patriarchal) elements and traditional gender role norms that have caused others to read the books as regressive and even sexist, while delineating the gradual progression from masculine norm to feminine norm, by applying gender/sex-based and feminist frameworks.

My thesis statement, and what I will try to prove, is the following:

Frank Herbert's *Dune* book series progresses from a masculine to a feminine norm. The Bene Gesserit organisation forms a key component of this change.

Dune's initial masculine norm, in the first four books, is subverted in the final two books, in which a progressive, female-hegemonic discourse supersedes its previous regressive, masculine one. I argue that this fact should inform our reading of the overarching narrative.

My thesis thus writes back to past gender-and sex-based research on *Dune*, establishing a more nuanced reading: *Dune* is not just patriarchal, nor regressive or sexist in orientation, as many make it out to be.

1. Establishing the Masculine Norm and Structures of Patriarchy in Frank Herbert's *Dune* book series (books 1-4)

While a majority of critical discourse has already focused on gender- and sex-based analyses in relation to feminism (Allatt 50), most of this research boils down to the same argument. They claim that *Dune*'s "old-fashionedness" (Roberts, History 341) (Evans 25), misogyny (Evans 3) and/or sexism (Evans 4) (Viberg 2) (Knězková 20) (Carrasco 51) is instigated by *Dune*'s supposed traditional conceptualisation of gender, sex, and gender-sex relations. These regressive elements are seen as self-evident since they assume that "*Dune* [predominantly] reflects [and regurgitates] the patriarchal views (of women)" (Evans 21), that were common in mid-century America, during the formation and publication of the books (between 1965 and 1985). A common thread in the research that frames *Dune* as regressive, sexist, and appealing predominantly to men, is that this is caused by the element(s) of patriarchy within the novel and a general masculine norm. In this chapter, I will trace down these aspects in *Dune* to establish whether they apply to the books, in what way, and if, and how, there are elements that resist these accusations. The first part focuses on gender/sexual politics and the other on the masculine norm in *Dune*. Because most of the research that frames *Dune* in this way base themselves either solely on the first book⁶, or (less often) on the first four books⁷, in this chapter I will also analyse only the first four books⁸, to then juxtapose this analysis later with one based specifically on books 5 and 6 as well (see ch.3). (Although, in this chapter, I do already allude to these later books and how they inform a reading of the earlier books in this chapter.)

As will become clear, this chapter concerns itself mostly with the politics of *Dune*. This is a result of my attempt to delineate patriarchal elements in *Dune*, which are inherently political. It is also particularly appropriate for a reading of *Dune* because the books specifically focus on characters operating and situations occurring on a governmental level, rather than concerning itself

⁶ (Mack) (Stratton) (Allatt) (Senior) (Viberg) (DiTommaso) (Roberts) (Manlove)

⁷ (Evans) (McLean)

⁸ This means that when I refer to *Dune* in this chapter, I mean books 1-4, mainly disregarding books 5-6 for the sake of argument.

with ‘regular’ citizens. “Much of the behaviour in [*Dune*] is political” (Manlove 81). In other words, Herbert in his books already foregrounds the political dimension of life and indicates how it is built on power-based relationships. I simply approach Herbert’s politics with the added layer of sex and gender, just like, for example, Kate Millet (in her work *Sexual Politics*) does: “For Millett, sexual politics refers to male control over women, and underpins a patriarchal society where all areas of power—including government, political office, religion, military, industry, science, finance, and academia—are entirely within male hands” (Duguid et al.). To argue whether, and to which degree, the society portrayed in *Dune* (books 1-4) is patriarchal, I too, roughly, explore the ‘areas of power’ Millet addresses here.

Succinctly, in this chapter I lean into the supposed masculine elements of *Dune* and examine the supposed male hegemony in these books by offering a general gender- and sex-based analysis of, primarily, *Dune*’s politics and the general social norms and its social standard, (focusing on the first four books).

1.1 Structures of Patriarchal Society in *Dune* (books 1-4) – Gender/Sexual Politics

In the first four *Dune* books there is an undercurrent of masculinity present. Men are portrayed and treated more favourably than women (seemingly) purely based on their sex. In general, there is a male hegemony, as masculinity dominates (Connell 204), and an overarching masculine norm seems to be implemented everywhere. *Dune*'s politics is a major contributing factor to this aspect of the books. As other researchers have pointed out, this relates closely to the concept of patriarchy, which is indispensable when doing a gender- and sex-based analysis of *Dune* as the entire structure and narrative hinges on it.

Despite the seemingly overt existence of patriarchy in *Dune*, it is important to note that, from the start, there are elements that resist such a reading. Many of these, other researchers seem to choose to ignore. The Bene Gesserit (B.G.) are the main juncture that hint at a more nuanced and feminine undercurrent throughout the dominant masculinity in the *Dune* narrative (see ch.2), but even in most (if not all) areas of power there are (subversive) elements that defy and contend being read as purely masculine, patriarchal, or even sexist, which I will point out in this chapter. Moreover, while patriarchal notions are firmly established in books 1 through 4, the way the narrative progresses shows how *Dune*'s patriarchy is gradually disestablished (as I argue in ch.3). With this, I add some much-needed perspective and nuance to a gendered reading of the *Dune* franchise.

Although the concept can be explained in a myriad of ways, “common to all definitions of patriarchy is the focus on men’s power, authority or dominance over women” (Dahlerup 3). More specifically, Kate Millet defines and analyses the concept in her pivotal work *Sexual Politics* in the following way: “If one takes patriarchal government to be the institution whereby that half of the populace which is female is controlled by that half which is male, the principles of patriarchy appear to be twofold: male shall dominate female, elder male shall dominate younger” (Millett 38). It relates to what Raewyn Connell defines as ‘men’s politics’, wherein “men pre-dominate in [all] executive levels” (Connell 204). In terms of *Dune*, while ‘dominate’ might be a bit radical a term to label it, and it would be wrong to designate all areas of *Dune*'s society as such, in general, most aspects of society are male-dominated and controlled. In most echelons of power, except one (the Bene

Gesserit Sisterhood, see ch.2), women are the subordinate of men. Even this deviation from the concept alludes to Connell's definition of men's politics: "the few women who do break through ... do so by their exceptional use of men's networks, not women's" (Connell 204), which the B.G. in particular exemplify (see ch.2).

The emperor's state rule and leadership are autocratic, since technically he wields absolute governmental power over his Imperium, and over the aristocratic bureaucracy of the Faufreluches (Viberg 1-2). As the autocratic position is taken up by a man, a patriarch, one assumes that the entire structure becomes patriarchal. However, *Dune's* emperor is only technically the most powerful person in the universe, since he is on the one hand highly dependent on other organisations and their resources (like the Spacing Guild and their monopoly over planetary travel and transport, and CHOAM due to their spice supply), while on the other hand, other organisations prove to be much more powerful and resilient than he is (like the Bene Gesserit and the Fremen). Moreover, both the Fremen, who are revealed to have the largest supply of water and spice: the most valuable resources in the universe which makes them the most powerful, and the Bene Gesserit (B.G.), operate almost entirely independently from the empire. The patriarchy is thus further tarnished by the fact that these powerful and influential groups are either less patriarchal (i.e., the Fremen) or distinctly unpatriarchal, and some might even argue matriarchal (i.e., the B.G.). The emperor has little control over these organisations, as they have more control over him.

Goldberg's definition relates to this, arguing that 'patriarchy' can be defined as "any system of organisation (political, economic, industrial, financial, religious or social) in which the overwhelming number of upper positions in the hierarchy are occupied by males" (Dahlerup 3). While this does seem to apply to *Dune*, and many researchers have approached *Dune* like this⁹, it takes into account only the events of the first book(s), ignoring the fact that Alia Atreides becomes emperor in book 3, diminishing the notion of patriarchy since technically at that point there is a matriarch as head of state, and because, "in strict patriarchy, kinship is acknowledged only through

⁹ (Mack) (Stratton) (Allatt) (Senior) (Viberg) (DiTommaso) (Roberts) (Manlove) (Evans) (McLean)

association with the male line” (Millett 42). In addition, the B.G. also occupies a high position, even considering the first book alone. While they are definitely outnumbered by men in upper positions in the general overarching hierarchy, the control they exert, tied to reproduction and childbearing is so influential that they are far more powerful than many suspect, despite their fewer numbers. Even though it is only the religious organ of the system (i.e., the B.G.) that is occupied more by women than by men, it is an important one; one which outlasts all other systems of organisations, enabling them to take full control (illustrated in books 5-6), (see ch.2 and ch.3).

1.1.1 Dune’s Great Houses – Family in Dune

The political landscape initially presented in *Dune* consists mainly of a planetary empire. The empire consists of the Landsraad, which represents all the Great Houses, and is in itself ruled by the High Council, dealing with disputes between the Houses and generally governing them. The Landsraad in its entirety, including the Houses, is overseen by the Padishah Emperor.

Because “Patriarchy’s chief institution is the family” (Millett 42), it is paramount to take a look at *Dune*’s ‘great Houses’ which function as a family: “a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole” (Millett 42), or more specifically as highly powerful ruling families governing over their domain with its internal family-structure.

As in most traditional realisations of the family, the ‘father-mother dynamic’ (i.e., Duke and Duchess) within the Houses is imbalanced in *Dune*. Marriages in the House-structure of *Dune* are treated as political, carefully calculated ploys to safeguard a Duke’s position by strengthening and/or uniting one House with another through marriage. This system of arranged political marriages favours men way more than women (Millett 36). Since a Duke is awarded inherently more power and status, women must vie for a (potential) Duke’s attention, while the Duke gets to pick and choose a mate (Herbert, *Dune* 143).

However, *Dune* does not always reflect this power imbalance. When Lady Jessica is accused of treachery she exclaims: “If I wished to destroy the Duke...or you, or any other person within my reach, you could not stop me” (Herbert, *Dune* 172). Jessica ultimately is in full control, stating things

like: “If I desired a puppet, the Duke would marry me,” she said. “He might even think he did it of his own free will” (Herbert, *Dune* 174). The fact that Jessica enjoys so much power, within a system that seems to restrain her, indicates both the opportunity and potential of women in said system, coincidentally revealing the cracks in the patriarchy, and the flaw in reading *Dune* as purely regressive and misogynistic because its political structure has elements of that.

With the institution of family being so prevalent in the early *Dune* books, one is left to wonder how it is conceptualised in the later *Dune* books. The answer is that it partially diminishes in significance, due to the collapse of the Houses-structure, and is partially substituted by something akin to family, meaning the B.G. Sisterhood (who are “in a genetic sense related” (Herbert, Chapterhouse 32). It indicates how the story gradually foregrounds more progressive, more favourable depictions of elements from the early instalments of *Dune* that were initially framed as regressive, (more about this in ch.2 and 3).

1.1.2 Feudalism

The Houses are divided between the Minor Houses, the Great Houses, and the Imperial House. They all answer to the emperor (i.e., the patriarch), but have some leverage over each other and the emperor. The Houses are fiefs, territorial obligations handed down by the emperor. This system is most often associated with that of European feudalism (Allatt 13), or rather neo-feudalism, with the emperor as Sovereign ruler. Despite the Duniverse’s (Dune universe) advanced technology, historically it harkens back to a medieval depiction of state, creating a rare ‘feudal interstellar society’, ruled as “an aristocratic bureaucracy”, governing over the rigid feudal caste system called ‘Faufreluches’ (Allatt 13) (Herbert, *Dune* 592).

A feudalist society is often considered to be inherently patriarchal, as the patriarchy is considered to be “a left-over from feudalism” (Dahlerup 4), since “originally, the concept of patriarchy was used to denote ... a society ruled by elderly men, or more simply, the feudal rule of the father as head of the household over ‘his’ woman, children, labourer and servants” (Dahlerup 1).

Despite the appearance of a fairly stable form of feudalism in *Dune*, contributing substantially to the notion of patriarchy, the balance between all the different components ultimately proves hard to maintain. Herbert's criticism of the Faufreluches class system appears throughout. Even the explanation of *Dune*'s society as a 'three-point civilisation' (Herbert, *Dune* 24) is immediately followed by a criticism of it: "In politics, the tripod is the most unstable of all structures. It'd be bad enough without the complication of a feudal trade culture which turns its back on most science" (Herbert, *Dune* 24). It proves to be a case of foreshadowing as this system, and all the ones that follow it which are related to it, eventually fall. "Throughout the several thousands of years depicted in the chronicle, characters use different strategies to gain and uphold power, and all ultimately fail" (Erman 1).

With such strong criticism of the (feudal) system it uses, one is encouraged to find other alternatives in *Dune*'s narrative. There is only one successful political system presented which is not portrayed as failing: that is the female-led, female-hegemonic democratic system of the B.G. presented in books 5-6 (more about this in ch.3.). Many researchers overlook this. Eva Erman in *Political Failures of Dune*, for example, posits that "democracy stays an almost invisible idea in the Duniverse. When referred to, it is mainly as an unstable, unwanted system of government (Erman 11). Erman's claim is not unfounded since the sentiment is even outright expressed by Alia Atrides in book 3, when the possibility of participating together on a smaller, local scale is suggested: "Atrides' power must never be [marginalised] by the chaos of democracy" (Herbert, *Children* 68). However, *Dune* changes its tune on democracy in later books, which most researchers, like Erman, ignore, as the Bene Gesserit admit adhering to a (semi-)democratic structure: "I suppose you're going to tell me you witches practice a form of democracy." "With an alertness you cannot imagine." (Herbert, *Chapterhouse* 160). However, despite this, *Dune*'s relationship with democracy is complicated: "Democracy is a stupid idea anyway!" "We agree. It's demagogue-prone. That's a disease to which electoral systems are vulnerable ... "But we do [have a democracy] ... We guard it well ... The dangers are great but so are the rewards" (Herbert, *Chapterhouse* 160). It does seem for a while, (throughout books 1-4), that despite Herbert's apparent indictment against autocracy,

sovereignty, and feudalism, the rather obvious system of democracy is not considered as a more appropriate alternative, but eventually this is proven wrong (in books 5-6).

The fact that the narrative clearly disproves of its initial feudalist and patriarchal depiction of state, showing its gradual decline and ultimate eradication, substituting it for a thriving female-led (democratic) state (see ch.3), shows the flaw in reading *Dune* as sexist or regressive simply because it initially depicts a patriarchy.

Conclusion – Structures of Patriarchal Society in *Dune* (books 1-4)

While most institutions and the general autocratic empire can be considered patriarchal, due to the vastly underestimated power of organisations like the B.G. Sisterhood and the Fremen, who operate almost entirely independently, and hold substantial control over the emperor, it can be argued that *Dune's* society is less patriarchal than first assumed, (and contains traces of a more progressive society (see ch.3). Moreover, claiming *Dune* is regressive or even sexist because of its portrayal of patriarchy proves to be a flimsy argument. The later *Dune* books (mainly books 5-6) reject and substitute the system with a democratic, female-led, and thriving one, implying disapproval of the earlier depicted patriarchy, which in addition, is outwardly criticised even in the early *Dune* instalments. Furthermore, even when isolating the issue of patriarchy in the first four books, despite the strong and undeniable presence of patriarchy in *Dune*, as I have made clear, I would like to add that patriarchy is not solely responsible for the oppression of women. “Often feminist analysts fall into the functionalist trap ... that all actions of the state contribute to oppression because it is a patriarchal state” (Dahlerup 15). Researchers who posit that *Dune* is regressive and sexist due to its depiction of patriarchy could be accused of falling into this functionalist trap.

1.2 The Construction of the Masculine Norm in *Dune* (books 1-4)

After having pointed out the more straightforward political and structural elements of *Dune* that lean more in favour of men, mainly through the perpetuation of patriarchy, some key components of *Dune* that express the same or similar ideas and principles are still missing. "Subjection of women or the dominance of men are not isolated topics "but an integrated part of the structure of ... society" (Dahlerup 8). The pattern wherein men are favoured more is not just part of these relatively easily discernible political and structural elements, it is also entrenched in, and part of, a social norm, a masculine one in *Dune*'s case, (or at least in the first four books). The elements that make up such a norm are less overt and more difficult to pinpoint, but not less forceful or damaging to certain social groups (like, for example, women). "Gender role norms share the characteristics of social norms, which are described as "rules and standards that are understood by members of a group, that guide and/or constrain social behaviour without the force of laws" (Mahalik, Morray et al. 417). Both the general concept of social norms and the specifically gendered aspect of it create a certain implicit and intrinsic standard in society. In *Dune*, most of these norms and what is perceived to be *the* standard favour men, are created by men, and are enforced by men. This makes the case for *Dune* as a society with a predominantly masculine norm, made up of smaller codes of conduct and social rules that favour men, (resulting in seemingly traditional and oppressive feminine norms). The main contributing factors to this masculine norm/standard in *Dune* are:

- the forceful dependence on men: "Crawley, Foley, and Shehan, state that "characteristics for femininity often refer to dependence on men" (Evans 52), which alludes to De Beauvoir's notion of 'woman as the other' (see 1.2.1 and 2.1.5), and is in stark contrast to "characteristics for masculinity often [referring] to self-reliance" (Evans 52), which the men in *Dune* demonstrate" (Evans 52);
- a heterosexual norm (because normative sexuality fortifies normative gender" (Butler xi);
- the reliance on a strength-based society: "the failures of the *Dune* empires bear ample witness to the fact that physical stability proves a fragile basis for a social order" (Erman 10);

- the depiction of a male power fantasy (McLean 152) (see 2.2, p.36-37);
- biological determinism, (which is most commonly associated with the Kwisatz Haderach, the male superbeing. (An argument that I oppose in 2.2);
- female servitude and subservience, which is shown in *Dune* by the depiction of women's labour which is almost always framed as a servant-role, (as wives, concubines, or literal servants). With subservient labour being mainly performed by women, the gender hierarchy in the patriarchy is easily enforced and perpetuated. It shows how "'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviour is the result of long and careful socialisation, a conditioned product of reinforcement" (Millett 224). (See also 2.1.4 for more on servitude.)

On top of these general contributing factors to the masculine norm (in books 1 through 4), there are three more aspects that greatly add to, and inform the analysis of this masculine norm that I wish to point out: the concepts of 'Woman as the Other' (1.2.1), 'Threatening Women and Demonising Femininity' (1.2.2), and the (phallogocentric) portrayal of women (1.2.3).

1.2.1 Woman as the Other

What informs reading *Dune* as 'masculine based' is that women are portrayed in relation to, and from the perspective of men. This relates to Simone De Beauvoir's theory on 'women as the other' which she denotes in her book *The Second Sex*: "She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (Beauvoir 44). How this translates in the *Dune* books on a relational level is exemplified in the following way: Jessica is mother to Paul and wife to Duke Leto first, while Paul and Leto are their own individuals, not described purely in function of their relation to Jessica.

De Beauvoir asks: "why do women not contest male sovereignty? No subject posits itself spontaneously and at once as the inessential from the outset; it is not the Other who, defining itself as Other, defines the One; the Other is posited as Other by the One positing itself as One" (Beauvoir 46). Why De Beauvoir's theory is so applicable to *Dune*, is because female characters in the books,

and more specifically the B.G., appear not to contest the male sovereignty, while in actuality they do. The B.G. submit to the position of other, and seem to submit to male sovereignty, but they do this while carrying out their breeding program, which is later revealed to implicitly, and without most people's knowledge, control men. They do "posit [themselves] spontaneously as the inessential" (Beauvoir 46). They do not resist being defined as other, because their willingness to submit to this allows them to cunningly take control within the confines of how men have positioned themselves and women. Thus, it seems that there is a male sovereignty, but with women (i.e., the B.G.) in control, (asking the question whether it really is still a *male* sovereignty). In some ways, *Dune*, through the B.G., reveals a flaw, or rather a loophole, in De Beauvoir's concept of male sovereignty, as it is shown that male sovereignty does not necessarily mean male power. (Add to this that the roles are eventually reversed in books 5 and 6, with women (mainly B.G.) filling the role of the norm/the one/the absolute and men as 'the other', see ch.3).

1.2.2 Threatening Women – Demonising Femininity

What adds to and coincides with reading the female characters in *Dune* as 'the other', using De Beauvoir's framework, is the fact that women are often portrayed as a threat. It adds to the analysis of those researchers that posit that *Dune*'s (assumed) "gender disparity" (Carrasco 43) is caused by a general "fear of women" (McLean 154). They do not pose a threat to characters' lives or position necessarily, but a threat to their masculinity. With this, the notion of 'demonising femininity' also comes into play as aspects like female reproduction are portrayed as female-controlled, dangerous 'tools' to subjugate men, (see 3.4).

The notion of threatening women (in *Dune*) can be seen as a result of the female characters' portrayal as 'the other'. The female is coded as 'the monstrous other' (Beauvoir 98). Because women are portrayed in function and relation to men, and not equal, the women are, directly or indirectly, opposed to the men. Because of the strong opposition between men and women, and because *Dune* adopts a male perspective, it is easier to 'villainise' the other, meaning women in this case, or to jump to the conclusion that the other is a threat. This is further aggravated by the fact that "most of

the women who appear in *Dune*'s pages, such as Jessica, Chani, the Lady Fenring, and Irulan all plot the murder of others at one point or another in the novel. Paul decides that his mother is in fact dangerous: “[m]y mother is my enemy ... She is bringing the jihad” (Herbert, *Dune* 370). “It is quite clear that in *Dune*, the few female characters are consistently positioned as the potentially threatening Other in relation to the central, heroic males” (Evans 51). However, it is important to note that the portrayal of ‘threatening women’ might demonise the concept of femininity, it is not necessarily a regressive portrayal of women. It might be an unlikeable and non-normative portrayal, but it also shows power and strength, aspects which many, like Carrie Lynn Evans for example, fail to recognise. Evans does notice this strength but glosses over the progressive impact this has on the narrative, and possibly the reader. “These women are depicted not only as highly intelligent, capable, beautiful and deadly, but also poised, confident, and aloof—a combination of qualities that young men may very well find intimidating” (Evans 51).

The undercurrent of strong, albeit threatening, women allows the presence of women to grow in later instalments of the *Dune* books. While I do get ahead of myself here, it is important to note that *Dune* progresses beyond these confines of seemingly ‘regressive’ or unfavourable depictions of women. In the last two books specifically, two opposing female forces, the B.G. and the Honored Matres (H.M.) are pitted against each other, adding perspective to the notion of ‘threatening women’. Women are no longer ‘the other’ in those books because ‘the other’ is the opposing female force. Thus, the threat is no longer femininity as opposed to masculinity, but a different perspective on femininity. (More about this in 2.2.b) and ch.3).

1.2.3 Phallogocentrism

The portrayal of ‘women as other’ and/or ‘women as threat’ coincides with a discussion on the portrayal of female characters in general and how women are framed in the narrative. In this discussion, phallogocentrism proves a useful concept to indicate how men are generally privileged in writing, and in *Dune*, and how the dominance of a male perspective has repercussions for the narrative and the writing itself. “The word is a portmanteau of the older terms phallogocentrism

(focusing on the masculine point of view), [which is evidently present in *Dune*], and logocentrism (focusing on language in assigning meaning to the world)” (Wikipedia). “Phallogocentrism” is defined by Jacques Derrida as: “the system of metaphysical oppositions” (Derrida, *Writing* 20) “predominant in Western philosophy that has until recently been written by men” (Addicott 1). It is about privileging men in writing, the dominance of men and the male perspective in writing. Additionally, “phallogocentrism [underpins] the theoretical frameworks ... understood as a dominant, patriarchal, masculine, construct” (Addicott 7), making the concept particularly suitable for *Dune* due to its strong reliance on such constructs (in books 1-4), (as already made clear).

Because of the idea that writing in itself favours men, many feminists like Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous argue for the use of what is called an ‘écriture féminine’” (Butler 198), which is essentially the reverse of phallogocentrism. Prominent voices, particularly during the feminist movement in the 1970s, like Hélène Cixous, foreground the concept of écriture féminine, or feminine writing, as a challenge to phallogocentrism, “or the ways that men’s writing and speech emphasise the importance of (male) reason over (female) emotion” (Duguid et al. 351). What is important here is that écriture féminine not necessarily means that the author needs to be female, as Cixous admonishes the male hegemony in the writing rather than the (male) writer itself. From this perspective, one could state that the *Dune* books as a whole show an evolution from phallogocentric writing (in books 1 through 4) to an écriture féminine in the last two books, due to their emphasis on the female. Other researchers have described Cixous’s manifesto in such a way that it almost seems tailor-made for the transition *Dune* undergoes: “Cixous’ theory of écriture féminine offers a challenge to the patriarchal symbolic order. She moves from “phallogocentric to the feminine” (Elyasi 167). Because *Dune* does undergo exactly such a change in its treatment of gender, it is a major contributor to my main argument that the *Dune* franchise as a whole is not at all solely phallogocentric (nor regressive or sexist).

Despite the harmful consequences of phallogocentrism, Carole Dely posits, there are risks in subverting it (Dely 9). Addicott claims that “the logic of phallogocentrism has been more evident in feminist texts. It seems as if in the battle of genders, feminists are fighting fire with fire” (Addicott

7). The problem, as Addicott calls it, that exists within this is that: “by feminists re-deploying male binaries” (Addicott 9), there is a “risk is that feminism might model itself after the phallogocentric exemplar in an inverse manner, taking up again its norms and representations” (Dely 9) (Addicott 2). The risk Addicott and Dely point out here, mirrors what occurs in the final two books. As I have already alluded to, and as I fully explain in chapter 3, *Dune* becomes a female-driven story with female characters and a (largely) female perspective, in the last two books. One could say that, similarly to Addicott and Dely’s argument, books 5 and 6 of *Dune* model themselves after the phallogocentric exemplar in an inverse manner that was set up in the early *Dune* books. The dominance of the patriarchal, masculine construct that threatens the oppression of women, which is so prevalent in the early *Dune* books, remains the same but with an inversion of gender roles, women being dominant and thus men being threatened to become the oppressed. However, while I will admit that these risks are present, I would abstain from defining men in general as oppressed in any iteration of *Dune*, or at least not in the same way as women are in many other instances in *Dune*. Moreover, in *Dune* it is not feminists that redeploy certain binaries, but Herbert himself, making the case, once again, that it is not really redeployment, as he sews the seeds for a female hegemony early on, which I argue many researchers and analysts of *Dune* fail to realise. Additionally, I think it is a stretch to read books 5 and 6 of *Dune* as taking up the same norms and representations like the ones in the supposed phallogocentric exemplar of the early books, as it is clear that these later books reframe, subvert and comment on these norms, heading in a completely different direction (see ch.3).

Conclusion – The Construction of the Masculine Norm in *Dune* (books 1-4)

What gives *Dune*, and the concept of gender role norms, some (more) leniency is the fact that there is a lot of variability concerning the actual realisation of these rules and behaviour. This is also why, even in early *Dune* books, some norms that seem to restrict women are not necessarily anti-women or necessarily lead to reading *Dune* as sexist. This variability is also what allows *Dune* to change and develop certain norms by subverting them in later books, writing back to what was

stated earlier (see ch.3). *Dune* eventually addresses and sometimes admonishes these same aspects, resisting the idea that *Dune* is in favour of a masculine norm that serves as a way to restrict and oppress women.¹⁰

¹⁰ See 3.1. for a continuation of this argument, wherein I state that the traditional feminine norms from the initial *Dune* books are either diminished or reframed in books 5 and 6, as the feminine norms in those novels are not standards women adhere to, but a pattern of social behaviour that perpetuates and indicates that women are in control.

2. The Bene Gesserit Turning Point

The Bene Gesserit (B.G.) Sisterhood is the key component within my argument that the *Dune* books are more progressive, (i.e., hinting at social reform, gender-equality and/or a more favourable position and portrayal of women), than they appear. Not only because of the later books, which subvert, respond to, and change *Dune*'s initial narrative, but because their presence and female dominance has always been part of *Dune*, and is established, although subtly and implicitly, from the start. The B.G. are a constant presence that devalue, deconstruct, and recontextualise (patriarchal) notions in the (early) *Dune* books. The B.G. also serve as the catalyst for an ideological change within the narrative from a patriarchal society with a masculine norm to a possible matriarchal society with a feminine norm, thus changing the gendered reading of the *Dune* franchise and subverting the notion of *Dune* as supposedly regressive, or even sexist and misogynistic.

I use the phrase 'the Bene Gesserit turning point' to help explain how *Dune*'s reliance on the B.G. in later books, and their (implicit) presence in the early books, subvert patriarchal notions and the masculine norm in the books, (coincidentally disproving, and offering more nuance to readings that claim *Dune* to be regressive and/or sexist).

There are two aspects that make up the 'B.G. turning point'. On the one hand, the B.G. offer a 'turning point' within the narrative, by which I mean that there are elements relating to the B.G. that consistently resist the patriarchal notions (delineated in the first part of ch.1) and challenge the masculine norm (second part of ch.1), often functioning as a counterweight to the more masculine elements of *Dune*. This is important since it indicates how a reading of *Dune* as traditional and regressive is contradicted from the very start, as elements that resist such a reading are implemented in *Dune*'s early instalments.

A second, more literal 'turning point' is the fact that the B.G. take over the narrative by book 5 and 6. The entire plot (now overtly) revolves around them, most if not all characters that are focused on are female and B.G., and the perspectives through which the story is told are almost all female (and B.G.).

The ways this ‘turning point’ is implemented specifically is delineated in this chapter (ch.2), alluded to in the previous one (ch.1), and further expanded upon in the next chapter (ch.3).

The most apparent and most important element that contributes to and illustrates the ‘B.G. turning point’ is the B.G.’s all-encompassing breeding program and the notion of motherhood and reproduction that makes up a substantial part of all *Dune* books, (and which is extensively discussed in this chapter).

In general, the fact that the female presence has always given pushback to *Dune*’s masculine elements, and the fact that the overarching *Dune* narrative ultimately steers into a distinctly female direction all adds to the argument that reading *Dune* as regressive or sexist¹¹ is either short-sighted or misinformed.

Finally, while I attribute the subversion of the masculine norm in the *Dune* books mostly to the B.G., they are not the only female element in it, but they are the most important, the most prevalent throughout the narrative, and the most interesting, which is why they are so useful to indicate a female voice and presence in the books.

To sum up, the coming chapter:

- a) establishes the B.G. itself, delineating how their presence resists regressive, sexist, and patriarchal notions in all *Dune* books.
- b) Secondly, I uncover the (only) male element in the B.G. Sisterhood, and one of the most prevalent concepts throughout the *Dune* books: the Kwisatz Haderach (K.H.), (and the Gom Jabbar test that determines this K.H.).
- c) Finally, I elaborate on the B.G. breeding program, due to its intertwinement with *Dune*’s key themes of reproduction and motherhood, which mirrors *Dune*’s progressive-regressive dichotomy.

¹¹ The following researchers claim that *Dune* is regressive and/or sexist: (Evans) (Carrasco) (Roberts) (Viberg) (Kněžková) (Hand) (Miller) (McLean)

2.1 Bene Gesserit Basics

The Bene Gesserit (B.G.) is a semi-religious, highly trained and powerful Sisterhood, consisting solely of women. While they are often framed as a semi mystic school (Herbert, *Dune* 151) or a religious organisation, and they are both those things, these are more used as facades “while carrying on their selective breeding program among humans” (Herbert, *Dune* 578), to gain further control and produce their long-awaited ‘Kwisatz Haderach’ (K.H.): a male B.G.

Members of the B.G. are physically and mentally trained (Herbert, *Dune* 69), obtaining superhuman abilities that can seem magical to outsiders, which is why they are sometimes (degradingly) referred to as witches. It is the B.G.’s mysterious ways, hidden agenda, aggressive femininity, and skills that seem magical to outsiders that make them a perceived threat to characters’ masculinity. It causes them to be called witches, as female characters are framed (mostly by men) as adversaries, honing on their most unfavourable traits.

The B.G. Sisterhood operates ostensibly as a single entity, each of them consisting of multiple selves (Herbert, *Heretics* 500), containing the memories of other sisters, due to their ability to share all their collective past lives (Herbert, *Heretics* 480). This is the key to their survival since it allows a single Sister to continue the legacy of the B.G. Fundamentally they are one, functioning as a sort of collective hive-mind. This hints at reading the B.G. as *the* woman, a sort of ‘prime woman’, but there are too many elements that resist it. While the B.G. cannot be perceived as ‘universal women’, due to their lack of overt variety (“no unmonitored racial involvement!” (Herbert, *Heretics* 386), and their upper-class sensibilities (“Never bother with underlings who can only say “No.” You sought the one who could make an agreement, sign a contract, pay off on a promise” (Herbert, *Chapterhouse* 415), they are good representatives of *Dune*’s depiction of femininity as a whole, and an ideal subject in my analysis of *Dune*.

The following passage encapsulates what the B.G. are about, indicating their conscious distancing from humanity, perceiving themselves as superior, their goal of improving humanity as they see fit, their self-control and detachment from other governmental systems, their distinctly feminine voice and approach, and how this is framed in the narrative, as something questionable,

non-normative but respectable, and how they are often perceived as a religious group and deliberately use this framing to their advantage without actually being one:

“[The Sisterhood] wish only to perfect humans and their governments.” ... “They think of themselves as a jury with absolute powers that no law can veto.” ... “You tell me these women who make religions to suit themselves believe ... in a power greater than themselves.” ... they avoid prominence. They are advisors, even king-makers on occasion, but they do not want to be in the target foreground.” (Herbert, *Chapterhouse* 381).

Their aim to ‘avoid prominence’ indicates how they persuade and manipulate people and situations covertly and implicitly. This aspect makes it seem like their presence and power is less than it actually is, since the books (certainly the earlier ones) reflect this secrecy by concealing information, apparently also tricking many researchers into underestimating the B.G., their presence, and thus feminine power and agency (Evans). In the last two books the B.G. are also forced to change this aspect about themselves as they take charge when all other political systems have collapsed.

2.1.1 The Bene Gesserit Voice

Despite being physically highly capable, and the fact that *Dune*’s general society is rather combat-driven (even determining the title and position of emperor by man-to-man combat (Herbert, *Dune* 545), the B.G. do not often use their physical skills. They prefer to influence matters diplomatically, only using their physical prowess when threatened or when they deem it highly necessary (Herbert, *Dune* 325). They do not submit to the masculine norm of exerting power through physical strength. What the B.G. do often exhibit is their power of ‘The Voice’. ‘The Voice’ is a highly specific and valuable vocal technique trained and used only by the B.G. It permits a B.G. to control others merely by selected tone shadings of the voice” (Herbert, *Dune* 607), allowing her to “bend the willpower of other characters in the novel by merely speaking to them” (Mack 40). The use of voice is in stark contrast with the strong physicality which is preferred in *Dune*’s combat-driven society. It is a distinctly female way of exerting control in contrast to a distinctly male way of fighting. The B.G.’s choice to weaponise their voice reminds one of feminist discourse which

often comments on the lack and stifling of female voice(s). It is linked to the idea of agency, which “is a key concept in feminist theory” (McNay 39) (Baxter). “By constructing the voice as a dimension of communication beyond signification, as an inherently feminine or motherly trait, and as a unique bond between self and other, Herbert taps into aspects of the voice that haunt contemporary speaking subjects” (Mack 41). The fact that the B.G. Sisterhood enjoys so much power because of their vocal control and communicative skills, and the fact that the B.G. do have so much to say, literally, in the first book (which only increases, particularly in books 5 and 6), goes against the patriarchal notions of the Duniverse and the way the novels are often framed as sexist and regressive (in relation to women).

2.1.2 Bene Gesserit and Religion

While the B.G. “[deny] they [are] a religious order, [they operate] behind an almost impenetrable screen of ritual mysticism ... [to such an extent, that their] training, symbolism, organisation, and internal teaching methods [are] almost wholly religious” (Herbert, *Dune* 568). According to Beauvoir “women are well suited to the roles of priestess and prophetess because they are positions on the periphery of society” (Beauvoir 151). Evans uses this to argue that women, and specifically the B.G., by “being kept in the margins, retain the status of Other and are prevented from entering the central, masculine sphere that retains all real public power” (Evans 67)¹². Evans is not aware that it is exactly because the B.G. “are marginal to the world” (Evans 67), that they are able to exert so much influence and are later able to survive and eventually take over the positions they were marginalised from. It is, for a large part, through their religious framing that they do so.

“[The B.G. are] known to create religions for their own ends” (Herbert, *Heretics* 196). The Sisterhood represents the danger of mixing politics with religion. In essence religion is their core tactic, they know this is the way to exploit a society’s weakness. They ‘sow superstition’ through religious doctrine (i.e., the panoplia propheticus), thus priming *Dune*’s society, and more

¹² see 1.2.1. and 2.1.5 for further discussion on ‘Women as the other’

specifically Fremen culture, for the shift in political structure in more covert ways. “The introduction of the Panoplia propheticus [in tandem with the Missionaria Protectiva¹³] as a tool for subjugation and the intricate breeding program within the Great Houses are two such strategies that can be associated with the interplay of religion and politics” (Viberg 16). By controlling the particulars of religion, “the Bene Gesserit have a manipulative lever on society in general” (Dune wiki). “The Bene Gesserit order [sows] infectious superstitions on (primitive) worlds, thus opening those regions to exploitation by the Bene Gesserit” (Herbert, *Dune* 598). Religion becomes a powerful instrument wielded by the B.G. in their patriarchal society, and a way to let their voices be heard, which otherwise might be silenced.

2.1.3 Bene Gesserit Femininity

In contrast to the largely male-driven narrative and structure, the B.G.’s teachings, and ultimately their praxis, is distinctly female. However, instead of purely adhering to a male perspective of femininity, or what men and women have coded as ‘female’ in the patriarchal society they live in, they harness their femininity, and some might say weaponise it: “The Reverend Mother must combine the seductive wiles of a courtesan with the untouchable majesty of a virgin goddess, holding these attributes in tension ... [to find] a wellspring of cunning and resourcefulness” (Herbert, *Dune* 22). Rather than rejecting the subservient, possibly degrading, distinctly female roles, such as that of a ‘courtesan’ or a ‘virgin goddess’ the B.G. find strength in them. While these notions of the seductive courtesan and the virgin goddess do play into heteronormative male desire, they are reshaped by women as a tool to gain control, re-addressing them as female-empowering. This also relates to the key principle of servitude the B.G. adhere to, exemplifying how they reframe male-dominated concepts into ways to gain the upper hand.

¹³ Missionaria Protectiva: the “B.G. system that implants prophecies, legends and superstitions in primitive cultures “for the protection of B.G. personnel” (Herbert, *Dune* 51).

2.1.4 Bene Gesserit Servitude

One of the main principles of the Bene Gesserit is ‘servitude’: “I am Bene Gesserit: I exist only to serve” (Herbert, *Dune* 24). The B.G.’s servitude is often fitted into an argument to prove how they conform to regressive, traditional gender roles:

“Even though the women of *Dune* often exhibit characteristics that may be considered atypical of women in mid-century science fiction, such as great intelligence, confidence, and physical strength, they appear only in the traditional roles [recognised] by patriarchy and in subservient social positions that leave power in the hands of men” (Evans 68).

I reject this analysis. The B.G.’s servitude, as a traditional subservient role, is more than it appears, as it is both ‘a front’, a façade for their true nature, and a way to achieve what they want. Both aspects of the B.G.’s realisation of the concept of servitude is shown in the following interaction from the first book:

“You’ve glimpsed the fist within the Bene Gesserit glove,’ ... ‘Few glimpse it and live. ... ‘Why aren’t you out destroying the Duke’s enemies?’ he asked.
 ‘What would you have me destroy?’ she asked. ‘Would you have me make a weakling of our Duke, have him forever leaning on me?’ ... If enough of us Bene Gesserit did this, wouldn’t it make all Bene Gesserit suspect? We don’t want that. We do not wish to destroy ourselves.’ ... ‘We truly exist only to serve”

(Herbert, *Dune* 174-175)

The metaphor of ‘the fist within the glove’ exhibits how the B.G. operate in terms of their ‘servitude’. Despite their enormous power, which Jessica, a B.G. Sister, admits having, the B.G. keep it largely secret. They reveal just enough to assert themselves within the Duniverse’s political structure, but not so much that people consider them to be a legitimate threat, (even though they clearly are). On top of hiding their true power, they choose to perform a subservient role according to a patriarchal society’s expectations (as wives, mothers, concubines, servants). By framing themselves this way they are allowed by this society to take up a certain space. They weaponise seemingly traditional gender roles, only broadcasting the appearance of servitude, while actually

being in total control. Their appearance of conforming to stereotypical gender norms truly becomes a role they play.

This relates strongly to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Butler argues that: "gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real. Her/his performance [destabilises] the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer through which discourse about genders almost always operates" (Butler xxviii).

B.G. do show aspects of gender as performance but it is not done to question notions of gender; it is used as a means to an end. It is not performed with the goal in mind Butler has. What does fully fit the B.G. is what Butler posits as the reason for gender performativity: "a strategy of survival within compulsory systems" (Butler 178), which is exactly how it is described in the *Dune* books: "We play the necessary role that saves us. The Bene Gesserit will persist! How long would they be subservient this time? Another thirty-five hundred years? Well, damn them all! It would still be only a temporary thing." (Herbert, *Heretics*, 376). With women in control over their own subservience, it is hardly subservience anymore, as they themselves indicate: "Subservience!" "Not at all. Were we ever totally subservient to one of the pre-Tyrant emperors? Not even to Muad'Dib!" (Herbert, *Heretics*, 371).

2.1.5 Bene Gesserit as the (Superior) Other

The B.G. consciously distance themselves from humans and perceive themselves to be superior to them. This is closely tied to their main goal: "the difference lay in what the B.G. did, the constant struggle to perfect human society" (Herbert, *Chapterhouse* 40), "We of the Sisterhood are minders digging ever deeper into veins of human complexity" (Herbert, *Heretics* 6). In distancing themselves from humans, the B.G. essentially 'other' themselves, which causes everyone else to perceive them as 'other'. This harkens back to Beauvoir's primary thesis in *The Second Sex* in which she posits

that women are defined as ‘the other’ in exclusive opposition to men, who occupy the role of the essential self or subject. According to Beauvoir, this is how men fundamentally oppress women¹⁴.

While there are undeniable parallels between the B.G.’s framing as other in *Dune* and Beauvoir’s concept of ‘the other’, there are some important distinctions. Most importantly, within the narrative of *Dune*, it is the B.G. women that make a conscious decision and effort to distance themselves from humans. The ‘otherness’ is not forced onto them. Secondly, the divide is between B.G. and humans, not necessarily between B.G. women and all other men in the Duniverse. In ‘othering’ themselves to emphasise their superiority in relation to humans, the concept becomes liberating rather than oppressing. Even if one would maintain the notion of oppression in this reading, the B.G. would be the oppressors, characterising humans in opposition to them, defining themselves as absolute and essential.

The distance between themselves and humans makes the B.G. perceive themselves to be superior:

“You think I, [a Reverend Mother], exist only to manipulate lesser creatures?”

‘I think you no longer really feel human. There’s a gap in you, something missing, something you’ve removed. You no longer are one of us.’

‘Thank you,” [Reverend Mother] said.’ (Herbert, *Heretics* 145).

Throughout the narrative, and specifically in books 5 and 6, they comment on (the flaws of) past (human) societies (Chapterhouse 40). This (female) superiority is never really contested, “superior observation lay ahead of all Sisters” (Herbert, Chapterhouse 5), and is eventually confirmed as they become the superior political force in the Duniverse in books 5 and 6. In contrast to *Dune*’s usual pattern of harshly criticising power-plays and players, it sides with the B.G. by depicting their society as thriving and full of potential.

¹⁴ How Beauvoir’s theory applies to the B.G. differs from how it generally applies to women in books 1 through 4 of *Dune*, (which I discuss in 1.2). The B.G. Sisterhood adds to this discussion and indicates how the conceptualisation of ‘otherness’ progresses through *Dune*’s narrative.

2.2 The Kwisatz Haderach (and Gom Jabbar) – The Bene Gesserit’s Male Component

What denotes and challenges the B.G.’s superiority is the Gom Jabbar and the Kwisatz Haderach (K.H.). The K.H. is a male Bene Gesserit (Herbert, *Dune* 219), a superbeing that is the result of the B.G.’s careful and selective breeding program. The Gom Jabbar is the test that determines who the K.H. is. The prophetic nature of the K.H. as a concept relates to the ‘chosen-one trope’ (Chowdhury 107), which in itself relates to the notion of male wish fulfilment and biological determinism (see 1.2, p.21), and is used by some to argue for the existence of traditional gender role norms that appeal to men (List 21). Both elements exist throughout the *Dune* book series, but are explored most overtly in the first book, to be eventually deconstructed by the death of the K.H. in the third book, thus disproving the notion of male wish fulfilment, (something which books 5 and 6 also do). Nevertheless, the K.H. as a concept and person is the catalyst of the entire plot of all six novels, and arguably the only element within the B.G. that is non-female-dominated. The K.H. threatens to expose the limitations of the B.G.’s power.

The K.H. is fundamentally more powerful than all B.G. as he can “look where [the B.G.] cannot” (Herbert, *Dune* 13), which reshuffles the power balance as it establishes this one man as the superior of all B.G. women, once more leaning dangerously close to the notion of male-dominance. The Bene Gesserit’s insight is limited, as “[they are able to] look down so many avenues of the past...but only feminine avenues” (Herbert, *Dune* 12). This means they are able to unlock the genetic memory of their maternal side, but not the paternal side, while the K.H. can “look where [the B.G.] cannot—into both feminine and masculine pasts” (Herbert, *Dune* 13).

Many researchers use this to substantiate their argument that this “reveals an adherence to stereotypes of essentialized gender: namely, that women inherently lack fortitude or bravery and are instead naturally weaker and more fearful than men. The Kwisatz Haderach is “naturally” more powerful to begin with because he is a man. Once he gains the mystical powers of the Bene Gesserit, he surpasses them all to gain the superhuman abilities of prescience and truth detection” (Evans 60).

While the fact that the K.H. has power over the maternal side might be interpreted as a man having control over femininity, it specifically gives him insight in feminine avenues which does not directly indicate the ability or even wish to dominate this feminine side. Thus, while researchers like Evans claim that the K.H. “operating outside gender limitations ... corresponds to traditional notions of feminine psyche ... and defends the patriarchal belief in biologically determined gender” (Evans 52), it actually reveals the opposite. The K.H. ‘operating outside of supposed gender limitations’ actually indicates that he does not adhere to gender limitations. The K.H. can be read as a being able to harness both his feminine and masculine side, in spite of his male sex, (which, from a contemporary perspective on gender and sex, alludes to what could be considered non-binary (ncte). The K.H. is also used by these same researchers to claim that “*Dune* ultimately defends the patriarchal belief in biologically determined gender as the reality shaping its universe. (Evans 52). While the notion of biological determinism, with the K.H., can be traced in *Dune* it would be wrong to use this to point out male superiority in *Dune*, since the ‘biologically determined’ K.H. ultimately fails. This long-awaited superior being, (who turns out to be Paul), is not able to carry out his plans, and eventually removes himself from society. Thus, while the K.H. could be read as a flaw within the B.G.’s carefully orchestrated plan and a rare loss of control, the B.G. ultimately, once again, come out on top. After the repercussions of the K.H. have been played out, after the K.H.’s son dies and causes a mass migration (known as ‘the scattering, see 3.1, p.45-46), they become more powerful than ever, making them, arguably, the only party to truly have benefitted from the K.H.

In addition, to determine the K.H., and whether one is B.G., the Gom Jabbar test of humanity is administered. The test detects if the subject is human, meaning whether an individual’s awareness is stronger than their instincts (Herbert, *Dune* 8). The Gom Jabbar test has many implications, particularly for the gender and power balance in the Duniverse. The test is “seldom [administered] to men-children” (Herbert, *Dune* 7), and if men are tested it is because the B.G. administrator suspects the subject to be their prophetic K.H. “Many men have tried the drug... but none have succeeded.’ ‘They tried and failed, all of them?’ ‘Oh, no. They tried and died” (Herbert, *Dune* 13). The test implies that everyone who is not tested is not only not human, but an animal: an individual

purely driven, and essentially controlled, by their instincts. All fully formed Bene Gesserit are eventually tested, implying they are all human. Because so few men are tested, and the few that do die, a glaring gender imbalance is revealed, (favouring women, mind you).

The gender imbalance that is implied by all of this is both emphasised and contested by the K.H., the only male B.G., and the only one able to survive the test. As the B.G. have been searching for the K.H. for over 10,00 years, it is implied that 'human men' are incredibly rare.

2.3 The Bene Gesserit Breeding Program – Reproduction and Motherhood

What is apparent throughout all six *Dune* books is the theme of reproduction (or ‘breeding’), and, relating to it, the mother: “the great problem of the human universe lay in how you managed procreation” (Herbert, *Heretics* 482). Reproduction is also the key component of the B.G., and one of the main themes of *Dune*, since their breeding program is the main cornerstone their sisterhood rests on, and their primary objective and tool. It is also a large part of ‘the Bene Gesserit turning point’, as the conceptualisation of breeding indicates how *Dune* progresses due to added and changing perspectives and gradual importance in the narrative, thus also instigating the narrative change.

The B.G. breeding program is a result of the B.G.’s ability to control their own fertility, changing the sex of their child in the womb and determining when to give birth. Through purposefully manipulating bloodlines and breeding specific genetic stock for more than 10,000 Standard Years, the B.G. tried to gain and ensure power, while trying to create their ultimate goal: the Kwisatz Haderach, “the one who can be many places at once” (Herbert, *Dune* 13), (see 2.2). The Bene Gesserit argue that their breeding program is more important than all other structures: “The race knows its own mortality and fears stagnation of its heredity. It’s in the bloodstream – the urge to mingle genetic strains without plan. The Imperium, the CHOAM Company, all the Great Houses, they are but bits of flotsam in the path of the flood” (Herbert, *Dune* 24).

Even before the eventual collapse of the masculine, patriarchal systems that perpetuate and strengthens a masculine norm (at the end of book 4, see 3.1), the B.G. had succeeded in infiltrating almost all organs of state of said system(s), creating a relationship wherein powerful people were dependent on the B.G. for important matters, which allowed them to exert influence (and thus power) over these people. The linchpin of their power and control, which causes others to depend on the B.G. is their breeding program. On a macro-level, the entire Duniverse is arguably ruled by the B.G. as a result of their breeding program and the Missionaria Protectiva¹⁵. Even though they

¹⁵ The Missionaria Protectiva is defined as the “Bene Gesserit system [that sows] implant-legends...seeding the known universe with a prophecy pattern for the protection of B.G. personnel” (Herbert, *Dune* 51).

avoid direct power, they literally control the main blood lines, influencing who produces a child with who and determining the sex of those children. They do this to safeguard and fortify their own position, and to eventually produce their Kwisatz Haderarch, a Bene Gesserit male who they believed would serve them to gain ultimate control over the Duniverse (see 2.2). With all these elements in mind, it becomes clearer why and how the B.G. are the true rulers with the most power and control. Even in the (male-dominated) patriarchy established in books 1-4, they manipulate and coerce those with seemingly higher ranks or functions, including emperors or duke's, exerting control by governing the bloodlines and regulating reproduction itself. One might wonder, if a patriarchal society that is actually controlled by women, is still a patriarchy, or just appears as one. It shows how the B.G. Sisterhood is a key subversive element in *Dune's* patriarchy, and a strong argument against those researchers claiming *Dune's* patriarchal notions result in a wholly negative, regressive portrayal of women. Framing the B.G. as the most powerful people in the Duniverse is a contentious point, though, since the B.G. avoid direct power, and because their core principle is literally servitude (see 2.1.4). Both these aspects seem to diminish the B.G.'s power, which is why many researchers interpret the B.G. Sisterhood to be far less powerful than I understand them to be.

Reproduction and Motherhood

In the first four books reproduction is heavily tied to the Houses, (see 1.1.1), which makes it seem as if women's only purpose is marriage and conceiving a child. Childbearing is even used as a political manoeuvre in the Houses, as a (potential) child can be used to form alliances through matchmaking. This doubles down on the archaic and patriarchal notion of valuing women only for this aspect of their sex. Adherence to reproduction and motherhood as aspects of femininity shows *Dune's* reliance of traditional gender role norms, (as I explain in 1.2.), and shows *Dune's* more conservative, and regressive side.

Interestingly, coinciding roughly with the *Dune* books' publication: "reproduction has constituted a central theme for second-wave feminist theory and practice, ranging from the politicisation of issues such as ... childcare, to mothering as a basis for feminist ethics" (Gerodetti

& Mottier 147). 1970s feminists, like Shulamith Firestone in *Dialectic of Sex*, argue against “the problematic linking of woman and nature” and attempt to “liberate women from the constraints of motherhood” (Firestone) (Gerodetti & Mottier 147). Both the ‘problematic linking’ and the ‘constraints’ Firestone mentions here are a key component of how women are portrayed throughout the entire *Dune* franchise. Millet confirms that “although there is no biological reason [for it] the two central functions of the family (socialization and reproduction) [are] inseparable from [it, and] even [takes] place within it”, which according to her “is strong evidence of how basic a form patriarchy is within all societies” (Millett 35). Similarly to Millet, Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* seems to perceive the link between women and motherhood as inevitable, even describing it as women’s primary ‘job’, mirroring how the division of labour in *Dune* is organised with most women not having a job, besides motherhood: “motherhood ... is her “natural” vocation, since her whole organism is directed toward the perpetuation of the species” (Beauvoir 1107). De Beauvoir criticises this stating that: “the reproductive function [is] no longer been controlled by biological chance alone but by design” (Beauvoir 1107). This duality is also explored in *Dune*, as reproduction and motherhood seem to be controlled by others, part of political ploys, carefully constructed and manipulated by (breeding) programs.

However, it must be noted that *Dune*’s concepts of reproduction and motherhood, how regressive they might seem, have a hidden progressive nature as the B.G. are revealed to be the main actors and manipulators of these concepts, through their overarching breeding program. Reproduction is, essentially, almost completely female-controlled. Because of this, the connection between reproduction and motherhood in *Dune*, which De Beauvoir perceives as “inevitable” (1107) and Millet calls “the birthright priority” (38), does not necessitate “sexual dominion” nor that “males rule females” (Millett 38), as they argue. While in theory reproduction (and motherhood) can become restrictive due to culture encroaching on it, in *Dune*, the restrictions that are put upon it are placed by women themselves, thus disestablishing the gender imbalance that is usually implied.

Bene Gesserit Mothers

The B.G. show a certain intrusiveness regarding reproduction: “the Bene Gesserit [sow] implant-legends ... [They have] the wisdom of seeding the known universe with a prophecy pattern for the protection of B.G. personnel ... [They create conditions] with ideal mating of person and preparation ... [they] adopt labels” (Herbert, *Dune* 51), and so forth. They exhibit all the qualities associated with overbearing, controlling, and manipulative mothers. Hence, even though the notion of mother and reproduction is not inherently (nor only) tied to the B.G., they could be perceived as ‘the ultimate mothers’, because of their invasive and widespread breeding program.

Motherhood in *Dune* is also framed by some as a form of demonised femininity, coinciding with how women are allegedly commonly framed as a threat and threatening (to masculinity) in *Dune* (see also 1.2). “Throughout the *Dune* series, [women are feared] ..., yet the most frightening women are seen not in their roles as wives or lovers but as mothers” (McLean 154). The B.G. women supposedly “embody these themes of the Mother of Nightmare, with their abilities to overwhelm the imperium with their pernicious influence” (Evans 6-7). Supposedly, it is the B.G. breeding program’s “(problematized) reproduction that finds expression in imagery of the monstrous mother ... the hazard of disastrous births” (Evans 6), which creates a “fear of and desire for a powerful femininity” (Evans 6-7). This would help to explain the narrative’s positioning and portrayal of the B.G. in the early books (1-4) as manipulative and untrustworthy, since in those books the masculine norm is still so prevalent, and thus the fact that reproduction is essentially controlled by these women results in the male characters’ fear which Evans relates to the monstrous mother. However, while the B.G. are characterised in terms of their reproductive function, and base their primary operation, their breeding program, on this aspect, ‘the institution of motherhood’ is not necessarily part of that same program. In later instalments, it is specifically mentioned that the B.G. make a conscious effort to resist forming any attachment to the child. In fact, non-normative ways of motherhood are conceived throughout the later books, such as the artificial axlotl breeding tanks (see 3.6.), or the B.G.’s trademark ‘no love-policy’ (Herbert, *Chapterhouse* 23, 58).

Conclusion – B.G. Breeding Program

Changing perspectives and conceptualisations of breeding/reproduction mirrors *Dune*'s narrative and ideological progression. It starts out implicitly and seemingly negligible, heavily tied to the B.G., although in truth it is dominant and inserted all throughout the Duniverse (and *Dune*'s narrative). Due to the patriarchal society the breeding program initially operates in, the notion of this breeding program, and reproduction in general, is heavily tied to the mother. However, with *Dune* gradually focussing more on the B.G and getting rid of patriarchal structures it loses some of the regressive, mother-bound notions initially associated with reproduction in *Dune*, and gains new angles on the concept.

With this, the discussion on the breeding program leads into the following chapter, in which I explore the final two books and the female-hegemonic, Bene Gesserit-controlled society depicted in it. The B.G. breeding program, as their greatest source of power and control, allows them to survive for thousands of years after the events of book 4, to stay in power, and take control in books 5-6 (see 3.1 for a detailed delineation of these events). In general, the B.G. breeding program is the aspect that most easily explains how *Dune* has always had a 'feminine side', how that feminine side is realised more non-normatively than many assume, and how that feminine side ultimately takes over and eclipses its 'masculine side', despite *Dune*'s strong masculine aspects.

3. The Construction of a Feminine Norm and Structures of Matriarchy in Frank Herbert's *Dune* book series (books 5-6)

3.1 Intro and Gender-based Overview of *Dune*'s Plot

Before delving deeper into books 5 and 6 of *Dune*, and the feminine norm and female-dominance that is established in them, I would like to contrast those books with the preceding four books. By first giving an overview of *Dune*'s overarching plot, including all six books, I indicate how the story reflects the ideological change from masculine to feminine (norm), of which the B.G. is the main catalyst and contributor. This leads into a detailed analysis of books 5 and 6 of *Dune*, which contrasts its femininity with the masculinity of books 1 through 4, thus contrasting and complementing the first chapter of this thesis.

The society that is set up in the first book exhibits a masculine norm and is heavily patriarchal, (as delineated in ch.1). This structure remains the same for the following three books, to be replaced by more dictatorial rulership in book 4, to then finally end up in books 5 and 6 with a female hegemonic societal structure, with the B.G. as primary rulers.

Most research focuses on the first book¹⁶, which sets up the key components that later books base themselves on. However, it is only from book 5 on that these components, particularly those regarding a sex-and gender-based analysis, are overtly changed and challenged. This is most likely the reason why so many researchers end up categorising *Dune* as sexist, or generally 'regressive', since the most progressive aspects, contained in the later books, are not included in their analyses.

Books 2-4 already deconstruct many aspects that the first book establishes, (mainly the pitfalls of an omnipotent ruler (i.e., patriarch). This in itself, already shows how certain unfavourable depictions of women, or the patriarchal society and masculine norm that is so prevalent in the initial book, is not meant to be an exemplification of *Dune*'s general ideals, since the narrative itself points out its specific flaws. For example, the narrative, through the B.G., make it clear how past patriarchs,

¹⁶ (Mack) (Stratton) (Allatt) (Senior) (Viberg) (DiTommaso) (Roberts)

like the titular God Emperor in book 4, were flawed, thus responding to, and critiquing, earlier *Dune* books: “That was an element the Tyrant (God Emperor) left out of his Golden Path. He didn’t consider happiness, only survival of humankind” (Herbert, *God Emperor* 68)

In books 2-4 the male-hegemonic status quo is generally maintained. Book 3, *Children of Dune* (note the title’s reference to the theme of reproduction), does feature a woman (Alia Atreides) as empress, which hints at more progressive gender portrayals, but she is depicted as a highly flawed, failing, and sometimes villainous ruler (see demonised femininity: 1.2.2), succumbing to literal possession and essentially guiding the empire towards ruin. Her younger nephew (Leto II) takes control after her demise. Upon his ascension to the throne, Leto marries his sister (Ghanima) in a symbolic marriage, while also marrying her off to a ‘royal scribe’, thus ensuring the Atreides bloodline (since Leto is sterile) (Herbert, *Children* 408). It implies that women are unfit rulers, tools for men’s own ends. (Keep in mind that this is later directly contradicted in books 5 and 6.) Ghanima is not even considered to be Empress, despite being equally capable as her twin brother. Her only purpose is to carry out the bloodline, indicating how women in *Dune* are forcibly tied to their reproductive function (see ch.2).

The fourth book, *God Emperor of Dune*, focuses almost singularly on Leto II as titular ‘God Emperor’. His rule is dictatorial and squarely based on the pre-existing patriarchal structures, continuing the masculine norm. (Even the all-female military, the Fish Speakers, are essentially glorified servants and concubines). The entire book builds up to Leto’s ‘golden path’, which consists of a need to diversify the human race, which is caused by ‘the scattering’: a major historical event occurring at the end of book 4 that consists of mass migration and the establishment of new groups and cultures, triggered by Leto II (the ‘God Emperor’).

As I have pointed out (see ch.2), not only are the B.G. a subversive element throughout all the *Dune* books, they are also a major cause of *Dune*’s progression, both ideological and within the narrative. This, ‘Bene Gesserit turning point’, as I have called it (see previous chapter 2.), is most apparent between books 5 and 6, and coincides with the events of ‘the scattering’.

The scattering serves as an in-universe explanation for the different direction *Dune* takes in books 5 and 6. In essence, a complete reset is implemented in order for women to advance in a new society (they build). Thus, the rulership and the society that is created after the events of the scattering (after book 4) are directly opposed to what happens before. This creates an overarching battle of the sexes, with books 1-4 representing a distinctly masculine norm, favouring male dominance (before the scattering), and books 5-6 embodying a distinctly female norm, favouring female dominance (after the scattering).

With a shift in focus in the last two books, the main through line of the *Dune* books is laid bare. The aspects that are focussed on in books 5 and 6 are not just specific elements that are now introduced as a result of the narrative's focus on the B.G., they are elements that have always been present in *Dune*, but in the final books are made overt and are explicitly commented on rather than being part of an elusive undercurrent fighting the masculine norm (which is the case in books 1-4).

Most of what is described in the final two books is an answer to, and critique of, what was stated in earlier books, depicting a society with distinctly matriarchal, female patterns as thriving and succeeding wherein the preceding attempts all following the same patriarchal, masculine patterns, failed. The gender connotations to these early depictions of society are also substantially diluted as the later books make it clear that it disagrees with these notions by heading into a completely different, more feminine, direction, favouring what the B.G. have in mind in terms of socio-political structure.

This chapter serves as an exploration of books 5 and 6, much like the first chapter of my thesis is an exploration of books 1-4. It shows how a (more) feminine norm is established and how the masculine norm of earlier books is reframed and, directly or indirectly, commented on, thus changing the perception of those books in the process too. Because *Dune* relies so heavily on the notion of patriarchy in the earlier books, I also look at the concept of matriarchy. Other primary aspects from books 5 and 6 that are discussed are the male characters in them, the concept of sexualisation implemented in these final books, the main conflict between the two opposing female

organisations of the Bene Gesserit and the Honored Matres (H.M.), and how this relates to the regressive notion of the 'female catfight and how it resists this reading.

All of this is done to highlight the progressive elements of *Dune* through the female hegemony of books 5 and 6, which supports my argument that these later books inform the preceding ones, laying bare the subversive elements that have always resisted the patriarchal, regressive, and sexist reading of *Dune*, and are now simply foregrounded in the narrative.

3.2 From a Masculine to a Feminine Norm (from Books 1-4 to 5-6)

Gender role norms as “rules and standards” defining social behaviour (Mahalik, Morray et al. 417), are depicted in a different way in books 5 and 6 compared to the previous ones (see 1.2).

In early *Dune* books, women largely conform to traditional feminine roles, meaning: “stereotypical and socially desirable feminine characteristics” (Mahalik, Morray et al. 418), made up by men, that indicate adherence to a male hegemony consisting of a masculine dominant norm. In books 5 and 6 the feminine norm is reframed and controlled by women themselves, meaning the remaining feminine gender norms no longer play into the hand of male desirability or male hegemony. The feminine norms are not standards, set by men, women adhere to, but a pattern of social behaviour that perpetuates and indicates that women are in control, meaning women no longer adhere to ‘feminine norms’ but ‘feminine’ *is* the norm, (which is what I mean when referring to ‘the feminine norm’ in books 5 and 6). Moreover, the ‘feminine norms’, (the stereotypical feminine characters) that were depicted in earlier books and are still present in books 5 and 6 are either completely reframed or deliberately commented on.

In general, and probably the most straightforward indication of the female norm, is the fact that the focus in books 5 and 6 is on women, meaning female characters, female conflict, female leadership, female perspectives, and the foregrounding of themes, motifs, and general ideas that are normatively attributed to women and considered female/feminine.

The *Dune* society that was set up in earlier books is (for a large part) demasculinised, or rather depatriarchalised. This is not a case wherein an author chooses to highlight different characters, (female ones), in the same (patriarchal) world that was earlier established. More specific elements that contribute to the feminine norm in books 5 and 6 of *Dune* are that:

- the entire governmental structure, or at least the most powerful one(s) is/are female led, (by the Bene Gesserit and the Honored Matres);
- the notion of patriarchy, or rather the elements that make up such a social system have been severely diminished, if not completely eradicated, and has possibly been replaced by a matriarchy (discussed below, 3.3).

That this is a ‘female universe’ or at least one where femininity has become (more) normative, is indicated throughout the books (5-6) by the fact that masculinity is specifically questioned by characters in the narrative: “Did they want his male viewpoint as she had said so many times? But what in the name of all the Missionaria’s false gods was a male viewpoint?” (Herbert, Chapterhouse 78). This example shows how entrenched a ‘female viewpoint’ is in comparison to a male one, and shows the difficulty in pinpointing *the* masculine and *the* feminine. The latter reading is not only a flaw and obstruction the narrative acknowledges, but one many, including myself, face when trying to apply a gender-based analysis. However, the fact that *Dune*, in its later instalments, deliberately engages with questions of gender and sex, while it seemed to adhere to such a straightforward masculinity in the beginning, shows how much its treatment of gender and sex has changed in the final two books, and coincidentally how and why, in its entirety, the *Dune* franchise is not at all a purely masculine, nor sexist.

The B.G. is most responsible for the ideological change in *Dune* (as argued in ch.2). The following quote perfectly encapsulates the B.G.’s impact and their position within the last 2 books and within the greater narrative of *Dune*:

“It confirmed that the Sisterhood must be one of his strengths. He already knew that the Bene Gesserit Sisterhood was one of the most powerful forces in his universe—equal at least to the Spacing Guild, superior to the Fish Speaker Council that had inherited the core of the old Atreides Empire, superior by far to CHOAM, and balanced somehow with the Fabricators of Ix and with the Bene Tleilax. A small measure of the Sisterhood’s far-reaching authority could be deduced from the fact that they held this authority (Herbert, Heretics 80).

The quote indicates how the B.G. Sisterhood is superior on the most basic axes of society: they have one of the most powerful military forces, far-reaching political authority, and economic superiority due to their monopoly of the most important resource in the universe, the spice melange. In comparison, in the preceding *Dune* books, all these axes (politics, economics, military) are male-dominated coinciding with either female subjugation or discrimination or a lack of representation.

As I point out in ch.1, this fact makes up a large part of the masculine norm and why it is so prevalent.

With the reversal of gender and sex roles in this equation, a feminine norm is set in place.

Quite fittingly, this quote also specifically features a gender connotation as the narrator talks about *his* universe, indicating that even in a so-called male universe, or from a male perspective, the Sisterhood is acknowledged as the most powerful force. This subverts the earlier application of Simone De Beauvoir's notion of 'women as the other', (see 1.2.1 and 2.1.5), since women, more specifically the B.G., are no longer 'the other' but the absolute, the subject, the one. Others are now determined and differentiated in relation to the B.G. (women), not the other way around. Moreover, the addition of the Bene Gesserit in 'his' universe is willingly perceived by himself as "one of his strengths", showing how the feminine norm has become so entrenched that it is welcomed and perceived as something positive.

3.3 From Patriarchy to Matriarchy (Books 5-6)

Since I extensively elaborate on the concept of patriarchy in the initial *Dune* books earlier in this thesis (ch.1), it is only fitting to apply the concept to the final two books as well. In a nutshell “common to all definitions of patriarchy is the focus on men’s power, authority or dominance over women” (Dahlerup 3). As has already been made clear, this is certainly not the case in books 5 and 6 of *Dune*. While the concept of patriarchy no longer fits *Dune*’s narrative, the concept of matriarchy, as “a reversal of patriarchy” (Goettner-Abendroth 49), just might. I consider this concept in relation to *Dune* by applying three different ways a matriarchy can be defined, to determine which versions fit (books 5 and 6 of) *Dune* best. The three options consist of:

- a) a basic definition of matriarchy,
- b) matriarchy as female supremacy,
- c) matriarchy as a society of peace.

a) A Basic Definition of Matriarchy

A matriarchy can be defined, in its most basic form, as:

“a system of society or government ruled by a woman or women.

- a form of social organisation in which descent and relationship are reckoned through the female line;
- the state of being an older, powerful woman in a family or group” (Oxford Dictionary).

This wholly applies to *Dune*, with the B.G. as the main axis in society’s social organisation, and them as the established female rulers. The definition even applies to the hierarchy within the B.G. with the (superior) Reverend Mother as ‘elder’, as matriarch of the Sisterhood, and how this title is continuously passed down among the Sisters.

b) Matriarchy as Female Supremacy

The second possibility to define matriarchy is to perceive matriarchy as female supremacy (Ellmann). Supremacy can be defined as “the state or condition of being superior to all others in

authority, power, or status” (Oxford Dictionary). As the B.G. superiority is made clear throughout the narrative, this definition seems to apply as well (see 2.1.5). They distance themselves from humanity, and attempt to guide ‘humans’ on the path they have deemed as the correct one: “Humans need us! (Herbert, Chapterhouse 389). From this perspective, the B.G. are all-knowing, all-powerful beings, escaping any hierarchy that any human comes up with. Hence, they have a hegemony over the universe, which from a gendered perspective, is coded as a universal female hegemony. It is hard to argue that they are the most powerful, organised, group in their current universe, (2.1.5).

This notion of ‘matriarchy as female supremacy’ relates to the notion of the male hegemony I discerned in books 1-4 of *Dune* (1.1.). The male hegemony I delineated as present in books 1-4 of *Dune*, has been replaced by a female hegemony in the final two books. Raewyn Connell’s concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’: “the configuration of gender practice which [legitimises patriarchy] ... and guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell 77), which exists in books 1-4, as I have pointed out (ch.1), is devalued, which is actually implemented in Connell’s theory. She states that the masculine hegemony can be challenged, which is why the theory fits *Dune* so well:

“I stress that hegemonic masculinity embodies a 'currently accepted' strategy. When conditions for the defence of patriarchy change, the bases for the dominance of a particular masculinity are eroded. New groups may challenge old solutions and construct a new hegemony. The dominance of any group of men may be challenged by women. Hegemony, then, is a historically mobile relation. Its ebb and flow is a key element of the picture of masculinity” (Connell 77).

This ‘challenging by women’ is exactly what happens in the later *Dune* books, the masculine hegemony gradually ebbing away after its failure(s), and the B.G. coming up with new solutions and constructing their own (female) hegemony – their female supremacy.

c) Matriarchy as a Society of Peace:

The third conceptualisation of matriarchy I explore goes against both aforementioned definitions. “Matriarchal patterns are not just a reversal of patriarchy, with women somehow ruling over men” (Goettner-Abendroth 49). Heide Goettner-Abendroth contextualises “matriarchies as societies of peace”, perceiving matriarchies as fully egalitarian societies, and thus offering the complete opposite of how matriarchies are often equated with “female supremacy” (Ellmann 163): “With matriarchies, equality does not mean a mere levelling of differences. The natural differences between the genders and the generations are respected and honoured, but the differences don't lead to hierarchies, as is common in patriarchy. The different genders and generations each have their own value and dignity, and through a system of complementary activities, they are dependent on each other” (Goettner-Abendroth 49). This conceptualisation of the concept of matriarchy does not completely match with the portrayal of society in books 5 and 6 of *Dune*. What Goettner-Abendroth calls “the usual misinterpretation” of matriarchy, is almost exactly how society is portrayed in books 5 and 6. A role reversal with women in control instead of men is in place, despite remnants of patriarchy and more normative depictions of gender relations. Thus, according to Goettner-Abendroth’s theory of ‘matriarchy as a society of peace’, the society depicted in books 5 and 6 is neither a matriarchy as a complete female supremacy (option b), (because according to her that is no matriarchy at all), nor a fully gender-egalitarian society.

The general disagreement in defining the concept of matriarchy might be attributed to the lack of real-life examples of such social systems. This disagreement mirrors how it is impossible to determine which definition of matriarchy applies to *Dune*. All three contain elements that fit and resist how it is formed in the books, although the notion of *Dune* as a female supremacy (option a) and b) applies more to *Heretics*- and *Chapterhouse of Dune*, than society as fully gender-egalitarian (option c)¹⁷.

¹⁷ One could claim that books 5 and 6 allude more to ‘matricentric feminism’ (O’Reilly), than a matriarchy, since the centrality of the mother obviously relates to the B.G. breeding program, their (and *Dune*’s general) insistence on (politicised) reproduction, and the coincidental connotations of the B.G. as mothers (2.3). However, *Dune* resists adherence to a normative conceptualisation of the mother, as I already made clear in 2.3, and thus also resists a matricentric feminism.

Feminist utopia

With a shift towards a matriarchy, or at least a female-centric society, and with the existence of an all-female led, and almost entirely female-inhabited, planet (Chapterhouse), the notion of a feminist utopia comes to mind. Chapterhouse planet, the home planet of the B.G., is portrayed as harmonious in contrast to barren wastelands and chaos in earlier books. “The Bene Gesserit had made this place supportive in ways he did not quite fathom” (Herbert, Chapterhouse, 20).

The five most salient features of feminist utopias, according to Alessa Johns, generally conform to the B.G. society: a central focus on “education and intellectual development”, and “[viewing] the non-human natural world as dynamic” definitely applies, while aspects like: “[embracing] a view of human nature as malleable and social rather than determined”, and “[favouring] a gradualist approach to change, a cumulative approach to history and a shared approach to power” (Johns 178) are more contentious, they also mostly apply to the B.G. planet and their socio-political structure.

Including this observation in my analysis mirrors how “feminists have joined in celebrating and critiquing utopianism. On the one hand, they have profited from the socio-political changes that visions of better societies have impelled; on the other, they have called into question utopias that depict static perfection – societies so ideal that they have nowhere to go” (Johns 174). These different takes are reflected in books 5 and 6 of *Dune*, wherein a goal towards progress (i.e., socio-political changes) is certainly in place, but on the other hand the staticity of a utopia is discussed and ultimately argued against. The above quote also envelops the evolution of the discussion around utopia. In the end, the B.G., and their home planet, resist the notion of utopia because B.G. are, fundamentally, “proponents of change” (Herbert, Chapterhouse 465): “Major flaws in government arise from a fear of making radical internal changes even though a need is clearly seen” (Herbert, Chapterhouse 193).

3.4 Honored Matres and Sexualisation (Books 5-6)

In *Heretics of Dune* and *Chapterhouse Dune* (book 5 and 6 respectively), the reader is introduced to the Honored Matres (H.M.), the main opposing threat to the Bene Gesserit (B.G.).

From the start the H.M. are portrayed as villains, which is interesting since they share a lot of commonalities with the B.G., mainly:

- the H.M. utilise and weaponise sex to their own advantage,
- they consist of women only, and exclude all men,
- their goal is to reshape the universe in their image of what is right, with them in control.

While this follows the same pattern as the B.G., the H.M. shows a corrupted, (more) aggressive version of it. The H.M. and the B.G. are opposite sides of the same coin, (later revealed to be the result of having roughly the same origins (Herbert, Chapterhouse 51). The H.M. function as a warning sign to the B.G. of what might happen if they were to radicalise, of what they might become. For example, the H.M. takes the B.G.'s emphasis on reproduction to the extreme, thus also amplifying the notion of 'demonised femininity' as they specifically pose a threat to masculinity.

Much like reproduction is a key element in the B.G., and *Dune* as a whole (see 2.3), so is sex, which obviously relates to it, framed as an, (if not *the*) essential component within the Honored Matres, resulting in them being called 'whores', much like characters refer to the B.G. as witches. "Honored Matres made sexual decisions much in the manner of the Bene Gesserit" (Herbert, *Heretics* 89).

It is the B.G. women that are the loudest critics of their practices, and are directly and explicitly opposed to the way H.M. treat sex, stating that the H.M. have a "sexual addiction [which is in danger of creating] disturbing ripples in the Bene Gesserit" (Herbert, Chapterhouse 50), which they are trying to avoid at all cost: "we must not become Honored Matres!" (Herbert, Chapterhouse 50). Through the B.G., whom the reader is supposed to align themselves with, the narrative makes it very clear that it does not condone how the H.M. 'handle' sex, critiquing aspects relating to it throughout the narrative.

One could point towards the H.M. as an example of the sexualisation of women, which “occurs when individuals are regarded as sex objects and are evaluated in terms of their physical characteristics and sexiness rather than other characteristics” (Liss, Erchull et al. 55), thus contributing to regressive and sexist gender role norms. While the H.M.’s sexual prowess and the depiction of various sex acts are very pronounced in the books, they are the ones in control over it and are not objectified by anyone. It is part of how they are ‘villainised’, their ‘sexiness’ serving as opposition to the ‘piousness’ of the B.G. women whom the reader is supposed to root for. In many ways, it reflects how “feminist rhetoric [shows] sexualised women [to demonstrate] their power and agency” (Liss, Erchull et al. 57).

The sexualisation of women in *Dune* also loses much of its oppressiveness because it occurs in a context wherein the masculine norm in the form of desirability is no longer prevalent in the narrative (Liss, Erchull et al. 56). In books 5 and 6, *Dune* uses sexualisation (of women) to actively comment on the aspect, turning societal expectations of women against men,

The H.M.’s sexualised behaviour is used by themselves to target, lure and trap men. Where the B.G. utilise their breeding program to maintain and gain greater control and increase and maintain the B.G. population, the H.M. use sex to subjugate men to gain (societal) control and greater power. Honored Matres “set people against each other by sexual subversion, [to] then be armed to destroy themselves” (Herbert, *Heretics* 31). They use sex in a way that has more in common with rape. “They are sexual monsters, his informants had said. They enslave men by the powers of sex” (Herbert, *Heretics* 90). This framing indicates how they represent a form of ‘demonised femininity’ as they are a clear threat to masculinity (see 1.2.2). They are said to “[hunt] in the streets, seeking new males to captivate and bring under Honored Matre control” (Herbert, *Chapterhouse* 186). The H.M. solely target men, creating a very transparent ‘battle of the sexes,’ in contrast to the more implicit oppression of women in earlier books. Interestingly this behaviour is not met with a lot of resistance by men, or such resistance is never mentioned within the narrative.

Hence, in the later books, men are arguably more sexually objectified and sexualised than women. The notion of ‘men as sex objects,’ a gendered role reversal with women being defined as

such in early *Dune* books (Herbert, *Dune* 188, 294), is taken to the extreme. Particularly from the perspective of the H.M., men are portrayed purely to be used for sexual pleasure or to be subjugated, which is framed as a part of warfare (Herbert, *Heretics* 456), contributing substantially to reading the H.M. as a threat to masculinity, and to the notion of ‘demonised/villainised femininity’.

Sexualisation thus serves as an example of how traditional regressive gender role norms are subverted, and in this case inverted. It would be complicit and wrong to call this ‘progressive’ though, since a certain gender, male instead of female, is still unequally treated. The “complexity of choice and agency within the context of postfeminism” (Riley, Shankar et al. 118) mirrors the multiple ways (women’s) sexualisation is conceptualised in *Dune*.

3.5 Honored Matres versus Bene Gesserit – Opposing Femininities (Books 5-6)

The main narrative thread the final two *Dune* books explore is the conflict between the Bene Gesserit (B.G.) and the Honored Matres (H.M.). The conflict is interesting on many different levels, mainly:

- as an illustration of how the narrative in the *Dune* franchise has progressed from a gender perspective;
- as an illustration of how socio-political elements, particularly elements of patriarchy and matriarchy, have changed in comparison to earlier books in the *Dune* franchise, and how this affects the reading of this franchise as a whole;
- as an exemplification of female-on-female conflict/warfare, which in itself garners a gendered analysis.

I will elaborate on all three of these elements, thus explaining why they help to deconstruct the masculine norm set up in the earlier *Dune* books, and possibly construct a (more) feminine norm.

The conflict is also one of the main points that argue against reading the earlier *Dune* books as regressive or sexist (ch.1), and argue for a more nuanced, possibly feminist reading of the last two books in the franchise – coincidentally changing the gendered reading and analysis of the entire *Dune* book series as a result.

From a gendered perspective, their conflict creates a dynamic wherein one version of femininity is directly contrasted with another. Two versions of femininity are pitted against each other. Their conflict mirrors the multiplicity of conversations about women's ideology and feminism. While one feels inclined to choose sides in such matters, the narrative makes it perfectly clear that it is the B.G. that are 'right', and it is them the reader is supposed to root for: "[They] had told him all they could about these terrible women (the H.M.). Far more terrible than Reverend Mothers of the Bene Gesserit, they said" (Herbert, *Heretics* 83). A certain kind of femininity is deemed immoral and abhorrent (H.M.), while a more subdued, pious version (B.G.) is preferred and idealised. Elements of the H.M. can then be read as portrayals or examples of unfavourable femininity, such as, for example, their aggressive nature or their fixation with sex. The Honored

Matres introduce elements that both add to reading books 5 and 6 as progressive (or even feminist) and critique it.

The fact that the later books focus on two female forces is particularly telling. While the outcome of the conflict determines the socio-political landscape of multiple planets, no matter what the outcome of the conflict would prove to be, because of the two main players involved in the conflict being female, there is never a threat of political structures regressing back to earlier patriarchal political structures or a situation wherein women are subordinated or perceived as secondary citizens. The future is, quite literally, female. In comparison, the main conflict depicted in the first four *Dune* books never even has the potential of changing the gender imbalance or improving women's position and lives in any way: Different organisations, mainly opposing Houses, try to outmatch each other, wanting the emperor's (i.e., the patriarch's) position. From a gendered position, the outcome of this conflict does not really matter (for women), since neither of the Houses intend to improve women's position once in power, or even hint at doing so. When there is a change in leadership, (which occurs in books 2, 3, and 4), the feudal system of the Houses with an emperor stays in place, resisting even the possibility of a more outward female presence or threat to its existing structures. Only after the complete eradication of that structure and system, and after a period of 1,500 years, a female (fighting) force is in power at which point the 'female' conflict between the B.G. and H.M. arises and the events of books 5 and 6 (*Heretics* and *Chapterhouse Dune*) ensue. Unsurprisingly this coincides with a complete restructuring of gender positions and vast improvements for the position of women and their wellbeing. This also adds to the point I made in ch.1 in which I argued that it is the main patriarchal structure in place in the first four books that 'hold women back', arguing for the importance of the (gendered) politics of *Dune*. The fact that the conflict (between the B.G. and H.M.) in the last two books) is not a battle of the sexes in which female subordination is a threat, but that it is a conflict between women with differing ideological perspectives highlights how much the masculine norm, which was so prevalent in earlier conflicts in the Duniverse, has been devalued. Furthermore, no matter what the outcome of the conflict proves

to be, there is no longer a considerable threat of women regressing to earlier patriarchal political structures in books 5 and 6.

However, the conflict between the two female forces can also be interpreted from a less progressive perspective, perceiving the female-on-female violence and conflict as a depiction of “the stereotype – although not the reality – that women can’t be in the same room together without getting into a catfight” (Voss 112). “Pitting women against each other is a typical anti-feminist plot device” (Santiago 81), which perpetuates stereotypes and further entrenches traditional gender roles in a culture (Houston 7). The fact that this trope is possibly featured, mirrors how “during the [1960s all throughout the 1990s], [during which *Dune* was conceived and published], the generational catfight between feminists became a favourite media handle for discussing feminism, expressed in popular books as well as academic fora” (Harris 221). Employing “the catfight framework or women-against-women presentation ... [marginalises] the concept of feminism and ... [creates] an odd space for women in the public sphere” (Voss 4). The catfight [serves] “as a metaphor for the struggle between feminism and antifeminism, ... [and provides] a symbolic catharsis of women’s internal conflict between the desire for liberation and the longing for security” (Voss 4), which both the B.G. and H.M. exhibit as well. Thus, the H.M.’s and B.G.’s conflict can also be perceived as a reflection of the (often generational) divide between feminists. The Honored Matres show many similarities with a younger branch of feminism, and within this feminist ‘catfight’: “young women are often blamed for the decline in women’s movement activism, being accused of a more commercialised and individualised commitment to securing their own personal goals” (Harris 221). This is shown, for example, by the Bene Gesserit’s concern for the prosperity of society in general, besides their own interests, in contrast to the Honored Matres’ pursuit for more selfish, personal gains (Herbert, *Heretics* 89). However, what one fails to recognise by “putting feminism in one corner and antifeminism in the other”, according to Susan Douglas, “is that feminism *is* the middle ground. It may be filled with ambivalence and compromise, tradition and rebellion, but the space between the two cats is what feminism is all about” (Douglas 14) (Voss 4). In a way, the B.G. and H.M. experience a similar learning curve, eventually realising that, despite their differences, they

have the same core values and goals, finding a middle ground between their two seemingly opposing sides.

The way they resolve their conflict strays completely from the 'catfight' trope, as both (female) parties reach an agreement and decide to co-exist with the eventual possibility of merging with one another. The fact that the H.M. and B.G.'s 'catfight' ends up this way, might even be read as an indictment against the trope as it proves that women, with vastly different points of view, are able to resolve their issues. The B.G. vow to incorporate elements of the H.M. and vice versa, choosing to coexist rather than try to outmatch each other. The fact that one party, meaning one 'kind' of femininity, does not trump another supports the notion of the latter two *Dune* books as feminist or at least feminist-leaning. It offers commentary on feminine/feminist issues and elements by framing them in a favourably or unfavourably way, but it ultimately does not fully discount neither of the opposing views on femininity.

3.6 Men in *Dune* (books 5-6)

As a result of the female-dominated society in *Dune*, the position of men has shifted. It is now men moving and existing within a female space rather than women manoeuvring within a male one. Nevertheless, there are still (major) male characters, albeit generally in a different position than in the earlier books. For example, the B.G. still employ male aids: “they would need Duncan Idaho’s new talents to counter the whores (the H.M.). He was no longer merely bait for the destruction of Rakis.” (Herbert, *Heretics*, 499). The B.G. are wilfully dependent on men, not suppressed or inseparably tied by and to them. The dominance of men is a thing of the past, exemplified by an interaction wherein the all-female Honored Matres notice the presence of the primary Bene Gesserit commander Miles Teg: “Teg’s dominance was not lost on Honored Matres. They glowered at him as they obeyed his invitation. Men ordering women about!” (Herbert, *Chapterhouse* 433). The Honored Matres, whose perspective the reader is meant to follow here, are astonished and outraged by men ordering women around. The fact that this behaviour is so remarkable shows how uncommon it truly is, implying that women in positions of power, giving orders are the norm.

Another example is the reframing of men as sexualised beings, such as concubines for example, in addition to women. While the last two *Dune* books feature a remarkable sexualisation of women (3.4), in truth, men are also subjugated to a version of this. An interesting role reversal in terms of sex, and the much-used motif of ‘breeding’, occurs wherein men are framed as sex objects, to be used and discarded by women: “Men were available—not necessarily for breeding, but for occasional solace” (Herbert, *Heretics* 200). This role reversal is featured throughout the narrative of books 5 and 6, with men performing (sexual) acts and exhibiting behaviour that is often associated with women in the earlier *Dune* books (Herbert, *Heretics* 203).

Main male characters fall into two groups: there is the group known as the Tleilaxu, with their own society and culture, the main threat and opposing force for both the B.G. and the H.M., and on the other hand, there are the specific characters of Duncan Idaho and Miles Teg, who make up the only other male presence that can be deemed substantial or important. Even these male

characters are rather peripheral and defined in relation to the Bene Gesserit. They resist and counter various elements of the B.G. hegemony but ultimately conform to the Sisterhood.

The Tleilaxu: A Male Attack on Female Reproduction/Femininity

The Bene Tleilax or Tleilaxu are the main opposing threat to the B.G. and the H.M. and form the most substantial group of male characters. They are an exclusively male group of genetic manipulators with their own xenophobic, isolationist totalitarian theocracy. “No one outside of their planets has ever reported seeing a Tleilaxu female” (Herbert, *Heretics* 79). In a way a ‘battle of the sexes’ is explored through the conflict between the Bene Gesserit and Honored Matres sisters, and the Bene Tleilax brothers (Herbert, *Heretics* 56), supported by the Tleilaxu’s astonishment by the female dominance and ‘strange femininity’ of the B.G. and H.M. (Herbert, *Heretics* 346).

However, calling the Tleilaxu the main threat to the B.G. and H.M. is an overestimation of their power. It is clear in *Heretics of Dune*, in which their role is most substantial, that either the B.G. or the H.M. (or both) are in control the whole time, outperforming and outsmarting them at every turn, denoting the B.G.’s superiority and the female hegemony and supremacy in the books in general. It is the Tleilaxu’s normative perception of gender relations and behaviour, in particular the concept of the ‘catfight’ (see 3.5), that helps to generate their downfall. They intend to pit the two Sisterhoods against each other and assume they will cancel each other out, with them coming out on top: “I think the Honored Matres will remove the witches from our path ... Already they growl against each other like animals in the fighting pit” (Herbert, *Heretics* 59). In the end, both the H.M. and the B.G. turn against the Tleilaxu first, aware of the danger if they would fight each other.

The female aspect within the male culture of the Bene Tleilax is framed as an abhorrent abomination and a corrupted inversion of the Bene Gesserit breeding program. They attack the concept of ‘breeding’ through breeding tanks, called ‘Axlotl tanks’, which are able to create humans replicated from a dead individual. The tanks are the most insidious aspect of their society, and also the main female aspect in it. It is revealed that the tanks contain the corrupted living organisms of the hidden female Tleilaxu population who are forced to produce gholas in a comatose state. The

seemingly exclusively male society of the Tleilaxu, actually “sequester their females” (Herbert, *Heretics* 184), turning them into literal breeding tanks. Hence the ‘tanks’ “are not actually tanks”, but “surrogate mothers ... under chemical control” (Herbert, *Heretics* 393). The tanks and the whole plotline involving them can be read as a reflection of recent developments around new reproductive technologies and the public debates that are prompted by it. In feminist discourse, it is often argued that “overly individualistic approaches which frame access to reproductive technologies in terms of the rights of individual women run the risk of glossing over wider structural gender inequalities, as well as the ways in which collective preoccupations and national politics are played out in this domain” (Gerodetti, Mottier et al. 147). The Tleilaxu’s use of ‘breeding tanks’ falls within the category of ‘overly individualistic approaches’ as it is a decision made by a fraction of the Tleilaxu’s (male) population, doing it purely for their own financial, and political, gain. This showcases structural gender inequalities in the Tleilaxu’s society, (as if the imprisonment of all women to be used as literal breeding tanks is not evidence enough). The fact that the individualists in this individualistic approach towards reproduction are purely male, shows the lack, or rather the absence of, agency and control women have over their own reproduction. The Tleilaxu women’s only value is to reproduce. With this the Tleilaxu attack the ‘natural’ process of breeding, and the Bene Gesserit’s own ‘breeding program. While the B.G.’s female-led breeding program is a natural, consensual one, the Tleilaxu’s is an artificial male-dominated one. Note, that these ‘axlotl tanks’ are also an affront to how the mother-role is conceptualised, which in itself is a key theme and motif throughout the *Dune* books (ch.2).

Thus, one of the main villains in *Heretics of Dune*, and the main male villains, orchestrate an attack not just on women but on what is set up in the *Dune* books as the basis of femininity: breeding (i.e., reproduction) and the mother-role. Add to this that these villains are framed as distinctly masculine, since they are deliberately made up of men and remove all women from society to be used as breeding tanks. This underlines the feminine norm in the book as the male threat to femininity is a large part of their depiction as villains and how they are ‘villainised’. In a way, they are villains because they are male.

Conclusion – The Construction of a Feminine Norm and Structures of Matriarchy

Succinctly, the narrative shift in *Dune*, with ‘the B.G. turning point’ as the key component of it, necessitates, and coincides with, a change from a masculine to a feminine norm in *Dune*. It is both a change within the story and an ideological one, depicting a gradual increase in (more progressive) portrayals of female characters, and gender norms.

Aspects from the initial *Dune* books that appeared regressive, or even sexist to some, are reframed and/or critiqued, subverting the overall reading of *Dune*. The main components in the later (two) books are the centrality of female characters (the B.G.) and their female conflict (with the H.M.), the masculine norm that is replaced by a feminine one, and a society that is almost completely depatriarchalised and substituted by something close to a matriarchy. With this in mind, it disproves and directly opposes those critics that claim *Dune* to be regressive, sexist, and/or misogynistic, as it indicates a disregard of the later *Dune* books at best, and shows a short-sightedness and a lack of understanding of *Dune* at worst.

Conclusion

I set out to offer a more nuanced take to the gender- and sex-based discourse that has thus far favoured a reading of *Dune* as conservative, regressive, and even sexist due to its depiction of patriarchy and the supposed implementation of traditional gender role norms. What my thesis makes clear is that, from the very start, there are clear indications in the form of character portrayal, narrative progress, and dialogue in all *Dune* books, that resist these accusations. The *Dune* book series progresses from a masculine-dominated narrative to a more feminine progressive one, with the Bene Gesserit organisation as the catalyst of the narrative and ideological change, and as a continuous subversive and progressive element in all the books.

The later *Dune* books, in particular books 5 and 6, are distinctly feminine and progressive, depicting an evolved state, opposing most elements, directly or indirectly, that seemed regressive or even sexist in the earlier books. The female-hegemonic discourse implemented in the final books, supersedes its previous regressive masculine discourse, reframing the masculine norm in the preceding novels, coincidentally informing *Dune*, and the gender- and sex-based analysis of *Dune*, and further disproving an analysis of *Dune* as purely masculine, patriarchal, or even sexist.

The juxtaposition I discerned between books 1-4 and 5-6 mirrors the structure of my thesis. Books 1-4 represent a distinctly masculine norm, favouring male dominance (delineated in ch.1), and books 5-6 embody a distinctly female norm, favouring female dominance (delineated in ch.3). Both complement and counter each other, the final two books informing and reframing the supposed regressive notions of its predecessors, which many researchers fail to realise due to their disregard of books other than the first (ones).

First, I leaned into the past research which favours the notion of *Dune* as regressive and/or sexist due to its adherence to traditional and conservative gender role norms and a patriarchal depiction of state. It became clear that these elements are present in the first four books, and that a 'hegemonic masculinity' (R. Connell) runs through its initial narrative, although it became equally clear that there were elements that resisted and diminished the impact of these damning notions. The

system of patriarchy initially presented in *Dune* is critiqued from the start repeatedly, ultimately fails, and is eventually replaced by a thriving female-dominated (democratic) state and system.

What informs the analysis of books 1-4, creates an ideological change, and one within the narrative, and ultimately creates a feminine norm is the Bene Gesserit (B.G.) organisation: creating what I called 'the B.G. turning point' (ch.2). Elements attached to the B.G., such as their religious framing and their 'servitude', prove to be often misunderstood. They consistently resist traditional gender role norms, patriarchal notions, and challenge the masculine norm (ch.1).

The B.G. breeding program, while initially seeming like an indictment against 'progressive femininity', actually indicates changing perspectives and conceptualisations of feminine norms (mainly relating to the prevalent theme of reproduction). The B.G. breeding program is one of the aspects that most easily explains how *Dune* has always had a 'feminine side', and how that feminine side ultimately takes over and eclipses its 'masculine side', despite *Dune*'s strong masculine aspects.

The B.G. and their presence mirror *Dune*'s progression from a masculine to a feminine norm and hegemony, both ideologically and within the narrative. They help to indicate and highlight the contrast between books 1-4 and 5-6. The (B.G.'s) female presence grows in strength and eventually takes complete control over the entire narrative (in books 5-6), including the characters and the perspective it is told from, which are from then on predominantly female. The patriarchy established in books 1-4 is substituted by their own female-led state and system after the collapse of these past patriarchal systems. Feminine roles are now almost completely devoid of stereotypical and socially desirable feminine characteristics, and the ones that appear regressive (like female sexualisation, for example) are implemented to add to the discussion on gender relations held within the narrative. The society depicted leans (way) more towards a matriarchy than a patriarchy (even alluding to the notion of a 'feminist utopia'), and the main male characters are either non-threatening villains (Tleilaxu) or allies under control of the B.G.

The overarching narrative of *Dune* is one wherein a failing patriarchal state, and a continuous attempt at placing a male ruler at the head of such a state, is eventually substituted by a more stable, thriving democratic female hegemony. The plot depicts how the female presence and power

gradually increase, in contrast to patriarchal and masculine-leaning norms, structures, and gender connotations that decrease. While the novels do contain unfavourable, traditional gender role norms, these are placed in a narrative that indirectly (and in books 5 and 6 also directly) comments on these aspects, ultimately reframing them as more progressive than they initially appear. This is most clear by the elements in books 5 and 6 such as the notion of sexualised femininity (and masculinity), and the reliance on the depiction of a female catfight, which seem to threaten the progressive nature of the books but actually support it by deconstructing and directly critiquing them.

Restating the traditional elements that thus far have been approached as self-evidently patriarchal and regressive, as I have done, adds considerably to a reading of *Dune*. With *Dune* only growing in popularity, I believe it is important to consider and inform readers of *Dune*'s more regressive and progressive notions, and to question what has thus far been taken for granted. Ideally, my analysis could serve as an addition to a larger discussion on science fiction, since *Dune*, the "influential grandfather" (Roberts, SF 40) of the genre made more space, literally, for women than many seem to assume. It could also add to feminist discourse, as my analysis shows a nuanced take on traditional gender role norms, how a progression from a masculine to a feminine norm can be realised, and what a female-hegemonic society could possibly look like.

My main impediment when writing this thesis was its limited size, which forced me to severely shorten and even remove certain parts, and summarise others. As a result, I was not able to include certain elements that would be interesting to address in an analysis of *Dune*. I invite other researchers to expand on these elements, such as the gender relations in the primitive Fremen culture, a more in-depth look at the structure of *Dune*'s imperial Houses, or the gendered angle to *Dune*'s military. Because the field of gender/sex studies is not only huge but also ever-expanding and progressing, I obviously was able to incorporate only a fraction of the material that is out there. There are many other possibilities to add to or complement my thesis, for example, by comparing *Dune* with other, similar science fiction novels, (possibly Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, or Octavia Butler's work), to explore a more general analysis of the science fiction genre in

relation to gender and sex. In addition, I believe it would prove interesting to look for (more) real-life examples of the fictitious female-driven society the later *Dune* books foregrounds.

Nevertheless, I am reinvigorated by my analysis of *Dune* to explore further progression in the depiction of gender and sex in literature. As the Bene Gesserit at the end of the final books state: I am ready for “the next phase. ... [which] may create interesting patterns” (Herbert, Chapterhouse 467).

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