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## Женские персонажи романа Ф. Герберта «Дюна» и их современные аналоги в интерпретации Д. Вильнёва: сравнительный анализ

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**Аннотация.** Цель исследования – выявление особенностей, присущих женскому миру романа Ф. Герберта «Дюна», написанному в 1965 году. В статье представлен сравнительный анализ четырех женских персонажей: Леди Джессики, Преподобной матери Гайи Елены Мойям, принцессы Ирулан и Чани с их репрезентацией в современной экранизации Дени Вильнёва «Дюна: Часть первая» 2021 года и «Дюна: Часть вторая» 2024 года; рассмотрены исторические и социальные предпосылки для создания будущего женского мира в романе, выявлены общие тенденции описания женских персонажей в научной фантастике и их представление на экране, определены уникальные черты женского мира «Дюны». Научная новизна исследования состоит в том, что в нем впервые сравниваются женщины романа «Дюна» с их современным представлением, обусловленным тенденциями и ценностями нашего времени: равенством полов и развитием феминизма. В результате исследования установлено, что, несмотря на феодальный строй и патриархальные ценности, некоторые женщины «Дюны» остаются влиятельными фигурами в вопросах управления империей. В современной экранизации женщины представлены как более свободные в мышлении и действиях, более независимые от окружающего мира, что было продиктовано спросом в обществе.

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## Female characters of F. Herbert’s novel “Dune” and their modern D. Villeneuve’s screen counterparts: A comparative analysis

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**Abstract.** The aim of this research is to discover the peculiarities of the feminine world in F. Herbert’s 1965 novel “Dune”. The paper presents a comparative analysis of four female characters, i.e. Lady Jessica, the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam, the Princess Irulan and Chani with their modern representation in the latest Denis Villeneuve’s screen adaptations “Dune: Part One” released in 2021 and “Dune: Part Two” released in 2024. The article tackles historical and social prerequisites for the creation of the feminine world of the novel, general tendencies to present women in science fiction and their screen adaptations, and unique traits of the women of “Dune”. The research is scientifically relevant due to its pioneer comparison of the original version of “Dune” female characters with their modern counterparts shaped by the tendencies and values of modern society – by gender equality and feminism. As a result, it is discovered that certain women in “Dune” manage to stay influential when Imperium government is concerned, despite feudal regime and patriarchal values. The modern screen adaptation shows the women to be freer in speaking their mind and in actions, more independent from the society, which is caused by the demand of the viewers.

### Introduction

Frank Herbert is worthily considered one of the best science-fiction authors of all times. His best-known novel *Dune* and its five sequels have been translated to various languages and have been adapted for the screen several times. “Unique among SF novels... I know nothing comparable to it except *The Lord of the Rings*,” reviewed Arthur C. Clarke, a British science-fiction writer. Despite its undeniable superiority in the genre and being a masterpiece of creation, there is still an issue which is causing debates when raised, that is the female representation in the *Dune* franchise.

The relevance of this research article is confirmed by the worldwide appreciation and development of the feminine influence in literature and in cinematography. In recent decades the world literature has seen the appearance

of a lot of strong influential female characters who have been soon put on the screen, for instance *Katniss Everdeen* from *the Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2008), *Valkyrie* by Maria Semyonova (2006) and *Tris Prior* from *Divergent* by Veronica Roth (2011). The market demand of such kind of female characters reflects the values of modern society, tendencies in its development and the shift from traditional patriarchic way of life. The complexity of female characters is well represented in Frank Herbert's classical science fiction novel called *Dune*. Although it was published in 1965, the novel contains a portrayal of whole feminine world which plays the most significant role in the *Dune* universe. The aim of this article is to discover and analyze the peculiarities of *Dune* feminine characters in the novel and compare them with the recent Denis Villeneuve's screen adaptation dating from 2021 and 2024.

In order to achieve the above-stated objective, the following tasks are necessary to solve:

- select the outstanding feminine characters from F. Herbert's novel *Dune*;
- analyze the historical and social reasons for Herbert's decision to shape the feminine world to be less feminist in the far-away future;
- classify the selected *Dune* women among other sci-fi female characters;
- discover the peculiarities of *Dune* women making them unique in the science-fiction domain;
- compare F. Herbert's representation of women with their modern interpretation offered by Denis Villeneuve.

The tasks we have set defined the research methods we resorted to: a descriptive method to collect the information about the outstanding women in *Dune*; a historical genetic analysis allowing to comprehend some historical and cultural prerequisites which led F. Herbert to believe the future feminine society to be less feminist than it is now; an axiological method letting us analyze values shared in the modern society; a comparative method to discover the differences between the original 1965 novel and the modern 2021 and 2024 screen adaptations.

The material for this research was collected from science fiction novels in question and from its screen adaptations:

- Herbert F. *Dune*. L.: Gollancz, 2007.
- Herbert F. *Dune Messiah*. N. Y.: ACE Books, 2019.
- Villeneuve D., Parent M., Boyter C. (Producers) & Villeneuve D. (Director). *Dune: Part One* [motion picture]. Country of origin: United States. 03.09.2021.
- Villeneuve D., Parent M., Boyter C. (Producers) & Villeneuve D. (Director). *Dune: Part Two* [motion picture]. Country of origin: United States. 06.02.2024.

The theoretical basis of the research is represented by both Russian and foreign scientific works focusing on the neo-luddism theories which correlate with Frank Herbert's vision of the future world (Tunç, Öcal, 2023; Емелин, 2018), the revert to feudalism (Березуев, Петров, 2022; Nicholls, 2017), the development of human intellectual abilities (Кокорина, Летунова, Сергеева, 2016), and a scientific interest in the female representation in science-fiction literature and films overtime (Chakraborty, 2022; Lauzen, 2022; Yang, Xu, Luo, 2020). Unfortunately, no scientific articles were found concerning the representation of women in science fiction done by Russian researchers.

The article possesses a high level of practical value as it can be used while teaching subject like foreign literature, intercultural communication and philosophy. The obtained results can be further used for creating course books and tasks for students majoring in linguistics and foreign literature.

## Discussion and results

The universe of *Dune* set in a far-away future is seen by Frank Herbert as a world dominated by feudal regime where, consequently, men acquire the most significant roles, whereas women's fate is limited to traditionally accepted roles, i.e. a concubine, a wife, a mother. However, if we read more thoroughly and more attentively, we will discover that the women of *Dune* are not as simple as they seem to be at first glance. To be able to conduct our research we have selected the most significant female characters of the *Dune* universe which appear both in the novel and in the latest films in order to analyze them. Our choice is narrowed down to Lady Jessica, the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam, the Princess Irulan and Chani. It is already obvious from our selection of characters that women who matter in *Dune* are mostly Bene Gesserit, except Chani, – “the ancient school of mental and physical training established primarily for female students after the Butlerian Jihad destroyed the so-called 'thinking machines' and robots” (Herbert, 2007, p. 588).

To begin with, it is necessary to understand why Herbert's view of the future world does not correlate with the scientists' predictions made now or with any other science-fiction representation of the future. In the *Dune* world we can trace the ideas of neo-luddism which led to the Butlerian Jihad also known as the Great Revolt – “the crusade against computers, thinking machines, and conscious robots begun in 201 B.G. and concluded in 108 B.G. Its chief commandment remains in the O.C. Bible as 'Thou shalt not make a machine in the likeness of a human mind'” (Herbert, 2007, p. 596). Neo-Luddites apprehensions of machines revolting against humanity came true in the world of *Dune* (Емелин, 2018, p. 105), followed by raising awareness and devotion to the development of human mind (Tunç, Öcal, 2023, p. 1). Thus, we can state that *Dune* and its inhabitants were shaped by neo-luddite ideas.

To further proceed with the correct understanding of the characters in question it is also important to mention that there have always existed intuitive theories among people. According to Johannes B. Mahr and G. Csibra (2021, p. 3), such theories have overtaken people's minds in various domains like Physics, Biology, Psychology, Sociology, and even Economics, making people rely not on the scientific facts, but mostly on the subtle, almost unobservable entities and on intuition. In *Dune* such intuitive theories are common for Bene Gesserit-trained women who rely on their intuition and get the responses from observing and analyzing the situation they are in, which leads to them getting the only correct solution in each particular case. Since Bene Gesserit, as all the *Dune* characters, reject

the use of machines, their purpose is to breed a man, “*the one who can be many places at once: the Kwisatz Haderach*” (Herbert, 2007, p. 13). Therefore, it is possible to find some common ground between the Bene Gesserit trainees and the indigo children theory which is popular now. Although, *Dune* was published 5 years before the indigo children theory gained its success, we can come to the conclusion that Herbert’s ideas coincided with the reality. Indicated by Kokorina, Letunova and Sergeeva, one of the possible ways of future development is the appearance of indigo children on the world political arena (Кокорина, Летунова, Сергеева, 2016, p. 51).

There is still one more principal historical prerequisite for us to tackle to fully comprehend the conditions behind the feminine world in *Dune*. It is known that Frank Herbert was conservative (Durrani, 2021), reactionist (Dite, 2021) and libertarian (Kunzru, 2015). The governing system of the *Dune* universe is feudal, which allows us to conclude that Herbert shared the ideas of neo-feudalism. Both Russian and foreign researchers have indicated that developed modern societies are experiencing the shift in values and have reached the conditions dragging them back to feudal relations, i.e. outrageous inequality, little labour power activity, disempowerment (Nicholls, 2017), religious crisis and disbelief in communist ideology (Березуев, Петров, 2022, p. 49), and privatization of law (Stone, Kuttner, 2020). Feudal relations dominating in the universe of *Dune* have influenced the position and the behaviour of women in the society: as hard as it might be today to conceive, women of the far-away future, in Herbert’s idea, will have lost their feminist zeal and will have behaved as they did in the Middle Ages. As it has been mentioned before, only the Bene Gesserit women are permitted to speak their mind in case men ask them to.

Taking into consideration everything mentioned above, the circumstances surrounding women in *Dune* (i.e. feudal male dominated societies, traditional values, rejection of human-mind-like machines, aspiration for mental development) shape their character and patterns of behaviour, making them resemble the female societies in the Middle Ages.

Having discovered the nature of feminine world in *Dune*, next foremost step is to classify them among other sci-fi feminine characters. According to the research completed by Sanjukta Chakraborty (2022, p. 930-935), science fiction is traditionally considered a genre created by men for men, therefore, it is not surprising that, until recently, female roles in the genre could be divided into the following categories: 1) caring creatures (mothers, lovers, subordinates); 2) scientists who eventually are turned into a sexually appealing object; 3) perfect girlfriends (not necessarily human) for the male protagonist. The women of *Dune* whom we have mentioned earlier, on the face of it, perfectly fit in with these categories: Lady Jessica represents both a loving caring concubine for the Duke and a mother for the ducal heir Paul Atreides; Chani falls into the category of a lover; the princess Irulan, although deprived of an opportunity to be a loving wife as she had always been trained for, serves her nominal husband and seeks being a mother; the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam represents a motherly figure for all her Bene Gesserit disciples. However, it has been already mentioned that the female characters of *Dune* are complicated if we read between the lines. The Bene Gesserit Sisterhood represented by the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam, Lady Jessica and the princess Irulan is in fact the most influential agent in the *Dune* Universe. First of all, the members of the Bene Gesserit Sisterhood attend all paramount political events and act as advisors and Truthsayers to the Emperor himself (Herbert, 2007, p. 4); secondly, they play a role of religious leaders accumulating both Catholic (their Reverend Mothers have the same powers as abbesses in Catholic Church) and Eastern influences (their balance and self-control referring to Taoism and Hinduism) (Kennedy, 2021) with their Missionaria Protectiva spreading myths and legends across the Universe and preparing ground for the Bene Gesserit arrival (Herbert, 2007, p. 25); thirdly, they are trained in the prana-bindu way enabling them to control every single nerve of their body and to examine the surround in the minutiae of observation (Herbert, 2007, p. 4, 7, 280); fourthly, they possess an incredible vocal control and are able to use the Voice to make any other creature obey them (Herbert, 2007, p. 6); fifthly, they are prominent fighters capable to win the best-trained Fremen fedaykins (a.k.a. fighters) (Herbert, 2007, p. 316); sixthly, they are fluent in various languages, including the Fremen Chakobsa (Herbert, 2007, p. 348); finally, their body can divert poisons and determine the sex of the child they are bearing (Herbert, 2007, p. 23, 400). Chani, in her turn, is a representative of the Fremen culture living on a desert planet Arrakis. She has not undergone the training as the other representatives did, nevertheless, she possesses natural shrewdness and presentiment (Herbert, 2007, p. 325). Chani knows well the ways of desert survival (Herbert, 2007, p. 321) and helps Paul to overcome Jamis in battle (Herbert, 2007, p. 339). Having been raised surrounded by superstitions seeded by the Bene Gesserit Missionaria Protectiva on Arrakis, Chani believes in the prophecy about the messiah from the outer space, therefore, she accepts and helps Lady Jessica to become the Reverend Mother (Herbert, 2007, p. 406), admires Paul and feels that he can make her ‘see things’ (Herbert, 2007, p. 408). Moreover, Chani shares traditional patriarchic values spread among her people, that is why she is a caring lover dreaming of becoming a mother for Paul’s heirs (Herbert, 2007, p. 536; 2019, p. 38).

All in all, the complexity of the feminine world in *Dune* does not allow us to characterize it as unimpressive. On the one hand, the women of *Dune* are subordinate to men, experience lack of gender equality, share traditional patriarchic values. On the other hand, these shadow women serve in all the Imperium institutions, influence the decisions of dukes, barons and the Emperor himself, and breed generations in pursuit of their own high purpose.

Equally important is to track the representation of women in science-fiction film industry. Despite the fact that nowadays women perform all sorts of roles in films, there is still a major disparity between male and female representation in films. Based on the findings of *It’s a Man’s (Celluloid) World*, it can be argued that by 2022 the female characters have been less likely to be a sole protagonist, to get a speaking role, to be more exposed to have a known marital status (Lauzen, 2022). In the same way, the tendency of including more females occupying various roles is linked to the appearance of female screenplay writers who are more eager to hire a female protagonist. Unfortunately, it is discovered that films with female cast tend to have a lower budget and, thus, are opt to criticism. At the same time, the female presence is often linked to the film’s success (Yang, Xu, Luo, 2020).

While this is still the case, the tendency of increasing female influence in sci-fi is positive. Since societies are de-veloping and promoting gender equality in all spheres of human activity, the percentage of female characters in sci-fi books has been growing. The appearance of *The Hunger Games Trilogy* by Suzanne Collins, *Shards of Honour* by Lois McMaster Bujold, *The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet* by Becky Chambers, *Ammonite* by Nicola Griffith and other indicate the demand, interest and response form the readers in strong female protagonists of the sci-fi genre. Together with the increasing feminist movement in the western society, started in March 2017 caused by Trump’s rhetoric which was considered misogynistic (Masuma, 2017), the feminine representation in culture has significantly expanded, which is proved by the release of such films as *Star Wars: Episode VIII – The Last Jedi* (2017), *Ananda: Rise of Notra* (2019) and *Poor Things* (2023).

Consequently, it is not surprising that in the latest motion pictures released in 2021 and 2024 director Denis Villeneuve allowed himself to alter the previously selected female characters, some of them slightly, while others significantly. We would like to examine them separately.

The central female character in *Dune: Part One* is Lady Jessica with 32:35 minutes of screen time, followed by 19:02 in *Dune: Part Two*, is a viewer’s conductor to the Bene Gesserit Sisterhood. The general characteristics of her character stay loyal to Herbert’s description; however, Villeneuve’s Jessica shows more confidence, ambition and power. The significant differences between the two versions are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Comparison of Lady Jessica

	original novel	motion picture
self-control and dauntlessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- is quite often unsure of herself (Herbert, 2007, book 1, chapter 3, 7, 23-29)</li> <li>- is afraid for her son before the test and cannot hide it (Herbert, 2007, p. 5)</li> <li>- cries over the duke’s death several times (Herbert, 2007, book 1, chapter 2, 11, 12, 22)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- can resume self-control throughout all nerve-racking scenes (Villeneuve, 2021, 23:00 – 24:30, 41:00 – 42:35, 1:27:45 – 1:30:00)</li> <li>- cries only once after Leto’s death (Villeneuve, 2021, 1:35:43)</li> </ul>
reason she bore a son	love for the duke Leto (Herbert, 2007, p. 23)	ambition to produce the Kwisatz Haderach (Villeneuve, 2021, 29:30 – 29:40)

Thus, we can argue that Jessica’s character has been slightly updated to make her character appear even more powerful to represent the Bene Gesserit Agency.

Likewise, the film adaptation of the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam with the given screentime of 5:25 minutes in *Dune: Part One* and 5:48 in the second part manages to leave an unforgettable impression in such little time. Her character remains loyal to the book description, embodying power, influence, and wisdom. The only difference in her character representation is the absence of tears when she parts with her disciple Jessica before letting her go to a hostile planet Arrakis (Herbert, 2007, p. 29; Villeneuve, 2021, 30:00 – 30:05). The effect of the decision results in the viewers’ perception of the Reverend Mother as a heartless, cold-blooded, powerful old woman focusing only on her motives and interests.

Another character of our great interest is Chani, the one who was subjected to most alterations. Chani’s screen-time is estimated at 6:22 minutes in the first film and 31:39 minutes in the sequel, respectively. Her character in the motion picture is a young woman of independent free-will who perfectly represents the role-model for modern girls. While her screen adaptation is undoubtedly admired by contemporary spectators, we have stated some major changes in her character in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Comparison of Chani

	original novel	motion picture
skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fremen born, knows the ways of the desert (Herbert, 2007, p. 321, 324)</li> <li>- owns and operates a crysknife (Herbert, 2007, p. 339)</li> <li>- provides food and comfort for her beloved (Herbert, 2007, p. 325; 2019, p. 33)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fremen born, knows the ways of the desert (Villeneuve, 2024, 32:00 – 34:00; 46:50)</li> <li>- owns and operates a crysknife (Villeneuve, 2021, 2:19:30 – 2:195:50)</li> <li>- demonstrates exceptional fighting skills (Villeneuve, 2024, 36:30 – 39:50)</li> <li>- rides a worm (Villeneuve, 2024, 1:51:00)</li> <li>- is a Fremen fedaykin (Villeneuve, 2024, 2:08:07)</li> </ul>
beliefs in legends and superstitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- believes in the Bene Gesserit legend (Herbert, 2007, p. 332)</li> <li>- helps conduct the ritual to turn Jessica into the Reverend Mother (Herbert, 2007, p. 406)</li> <li>- goes to pray to the desert spirits to help her conceive a child (Herbert, 2019, p. 64)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- is critical towards the prophecy (Villeneuve, 2024, 23:05 – 23:50; 45:55; 2:01:46 – 2:01:50)</li> <li>- is against the idea of Paul being a messiah (Villeneuve, 2021, 2:19:30; 2024, 1:55:00 – 1:57:33)</li> </ul>
love for Paul	unconditionally falls in love with Paul Atreides (Herbert, 2007, p. 555)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- makes Paul win her love for him (Villeneuve, 2024, 32:00 – 34:00)</li> <li>- doubts him and proudly walks away when offended (Villeneuve, 2024, 1:57:27 – 1:57:33)</li> </ul>
compliance to men	obeys what a man commands her to do (Herbert, 2007, p. 543; 2019, p. 138)	is difficult to manage, always speaks her mind (Villeneuve, 2024, 1:55:27 – 1:55:33; 2:35:00 – 2:35:36)

Considering the obtained results presented in Table 2, it can be concluded that in order to render Chani's character more attractive for the audience and for her not to receive too much criticism, the film crew had to deviate from the original Chani, putting on her the demanded by time air of feminism and independence.

The last character to be examined in this paper is the Princess Irulan who makes her actual appearance only in the last chapters of the book, nevertheless, her name is known to the reader from the first lines of the story – she acts as a historian who recorded the happening events, which makes her the actual narrator of the book. In Villeneuve's adaptation Irulan is introduced only in the second part of the franchise, with a screentime of 7:47 minutes. Denis Villeneuve not only does keep her narrator's role in *Dune: Part Two*, but also augment's the impact of her character by giving her speaking scenes. In *Dune* novel, Irulan is not given a chance to actually speak or interact with other characters, until her appearance in *Dune Messiah*. Conversely, in *Dune: Part Two*, the viewers can feel her weight and influence on the events of the story, can assume how clever and prudent she is in her calculations. The upgrade of Irulan's character was probably due to the Bechdel test in some way, and, undoubtedly, to make the character up-to-date, bring more views and positive feedback of the viewers.

Hence, it has been shown that the *Dune* female characters are worth examining and analyzing, since they are represented as caring creatures meant to support men, though, at the same time, they disclose the limitless power each woman possesses.

## Conclusion

The results of our research permit us to outline the following conclusions. The coherent analysis of the governmental and ideological regime of the future *Dune* world surrounding the women in question has shown that there are some neo-luddite and neo-feudal ideas thread throughout the novel combined with intuitive theories, leading to the abandonment of human-mind-like technologies and to the appearance of a highly-developed mind of a person with, for a contemporary reader, super-human abilities, mostly possessed and exercised by women of the Bene Gesserit Sisterhood. At the same time, the research has shown that nowadays there are some prerequisites for the governmental regime to go back to feudalism in the future, which Herbert sets in his novel, causing certain limits upon a woman whose utmost role remains that of being a mother and a caring wife for her husband.

In spite of some objective limitations the women are bound to in *Dune*, all the selected women find a way to make their voices heard and turn the tables so that they could insensibly control all the important decisions men take in the Imperium. However, it is true that in the latest screen adaptations released in 2021 and 2024 all the characters, i.e. Lady Jessica, the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam, the Princess Irulan, and Chani, are given more independence and power than in the original 1965 novel. The reasons for such alterations are caused by the demands of modern society, the uprising feminist ideology, the fight for gender equality, and the influence women have recently gained in the cinema industry.

This research contains high potential for further investigation. A more detailed analysis of the feminine representation of Herbert's characters can be made with the appearance of the screen adaptation for *Dune Messiah*. Moreover, it is possible to compare the women of *Dune* in all the existing interpretations. Finally, as discovered, the sci-fi industry is on its way to establishing gender equality both in literature and in films, thus, this paper can serve as a starting point for major research.

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