

Identity, Politics, and the Postmodern Hero in Frank Herbert's *Dune* and *Dune Messiah*

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Abstract

This article examines how *Dune* can be interpreted through a postmodern lens by focusing on identity fragmentation, systemic forces, and the critique of heroic archetypes and grand narratives. The article can be read as a contemporary critique of right-wing heroism which glorifies singular “great men”. This aligns with Herbert’s intention of deconstructing the heroic figure. Witnessing a glorification of Paul Atreides, *Dune Messiah* was written specifically in order to reveal the consequences of such messianic narratives. Drawing from the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis, identity theory, and ideology, the article shows a mirroring effect between Paul Atreides’ shattered identity and the fragmentation of the Fremen’s religious and political narrative. Typical of trauma theory, *Dune* and *Dune Messiah* exemplify the notions of the perpetuity of trauma as the article shows how the oppression of the Fremen leads to cycles of violence and even more systemic oppression as Paul Atreides becomes Emperor. It can also be argued that the article can be integrated into contemporary political discourse since, nowadays, there is definitely a growing trend in right-wing policies and the rise of messianic figures in politics, similar to the story of *Dune*.

Keywords

Dune, postmodernism, heroic narratives, psychoanalysis, identity, trauma, ideology, politics.

In traditional narratives, heroes are often portrayed as unified subjects – individuals with pre-established identities who shape the world they inhabit through their choices and actions. Postmodern thought, however, opposes this idea, arguing that it is the world that shapes the protagonist as his identity is fragmented, and there is no stable sense of self. To put in simpler terms, a heroic figure will constantly shape the world he inhabits, whereas postmodern narratives, which typically are more interested in the common man, show the fragmentation of the protagonist’s identity by the external factors of the world they inhabit. This notion is particularly relevant in analysing Paul Atreides, whose journey reveals the fragility of identity and the limitations of agency. Through the lens of Lacan’s theoretical framework, Paul’s shifting roles underscore the alienation inherent in constructing an identity shaped by collective fantasy and systemic forces.

The right-wing political fascination with heroic figures often leans on the archetype of the “great man” who embodies strength, clarity of purpose, and moral or ideological superiority. These narratives thrive on hero worship, destiny, and the triumph of will. This essay not only examines Paul’s journey as a critique of the unified subject but also as a critique of right-wing heroic stories and political agendas. Paul Atreides begins as a classical hero in *Dune* but his arc evolves into a critique of heroism itself and *Dune Messiah* (which according to Brian Herbert’s introduction of the novel, was written by Frank Herbert as a response to the general attitude of love and fascination for the heroic figure of Paul Atreides) shows the fallout of the messianic

narrative: Paul becomes a prisoner of the mythos surrounding him, unable to escape the oppressive weight of prescience and the religious jihad carried out in his name. This tension aligns with postmodernism's focus on dismantling grand narratives and exploring the fragmented, flawed nature of human experiences.

In modern day, the rise of right-wing populism across Europe reflects a broader trend of disillusionment with traditional political structures and the appeal of messianic narratives in times of crisis. Right-wing movements often emphasize issues like immigration and national identity, reflecting concerns over cultural integration, an ongoing and seemingly everlasting war against the “woke elites” and obviously a war to protect cultural and social heritage. It should be clearly stated that this ongoing trend has been growing steadily in our own country as well, and during the elections at the end of 2024, it grew enough to be mainstream. It is fascinating how *Dune* offers a compelling lens to examine the socio-political mechanism that elevates charismatic leaders into saviour-like roles. Both Herbert's fictional universe and the modern political landscape reveal how systemic crises, cultural grief, and collective fantasies converge to produce figures who embody the hopes and fears of the people. Both Paul and modern populist leaders are products of systemic distrust. Paul benefits from a pre-existing web of religious myths, while populist leaders thrive in environments where distrust in political institutions is at an all-time high.

Paul Atreides is constantly shaping and altering his own persona, identity, and ultimately ego in order to traverse the safest path toward a future that may satisfy his desire for revenge, but that could also prove beneficial for humankind. However, his intentions and abilities only create a sense of alienation and fragmentation of self. Paul Atreides' ascension to power in *Dune* is fundamentally shaped by conspiratorial forces. The Bene Gesserit's Missionaria Protectiva spreads religious myths across the Imperium, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy that ensures Paul will be received as a messianic figure when he arrives on Arrakis. The Fremen, having internalized these myths, see Paul not as a mere noble in exile but as the Lisan al-Gaib, the prophesied saviour who will lead them to victory. In Florian Andrei Vlad's analysis of conspiracy theories in “The Intersection of Postmodern Thought and Conspiracy Theories in the Long 1960s” his notion of “incredulity narrative” is particularly relevant here because it reflects both on the constructed fantasy of the Fremen people. Vlad describes the “incredulity narrative” as dominant power structures that manipulate belief systems to sustain their influence. In *Dune*, Paul does not consciously create this conspiracy, but he steps into it, recognising its potential to grant him control over the Fremen and, by extension, the Imperium. Vlad describes how “the true believers, promoters, fans, and victims of conspiracy theories are also included among these disbelievers in official claims of hegemonic positions” (Vlad 2024: 2) Just as the Fremen interpret Paul's arrival as confirmation of an ancient prophecy, Georgescu's followers see him as the inevitable response to Romania's socio-political decay.

In postmodern fashion, Paul Atreides can be interpreted as a decentred subject. Even though he is the protagonist of the story and thus the focal point of *Dune*, he is powerless against his own “heroic” abilities. His prescient abilities—the way in which he dreams about the future and the multitude of outcomes that can alter and shape not only his fate but the fate of millions of people around him—make him powerless against the grander socio-political landscape that he

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inhabits. Paul's journey reveals the paradoxical nature of knowledge, as pre-established notions of the future become methods of imprisonment.

This philosophical idea of determinism challenges the traditional notion of a unified, autonomous individual. In writing trauma or about trauma, Jacques Lacan assumes a prominent place in an exploration of identity, the subject but also as an analogy for the Real. His observations on the subject in relation to language and the unconscious invite connections between psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theories. Lacan challenged Freud's ideas of the unconscious as unruly, chaotic, instinctual, and pre-verbal. In *his Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Lacan firmly claimed that "the unconscious is structured like a language" (Lacan, 20). Thus, he sees the unconscious as structured as a language, more specifically as writing in its own right, leading to the acceptance of views promoted by structuralist and poststructuralist approaches. In Lacan's opinion, the unconscious assumes the central place in the topography of the human psyche, not a waste dump in which Freudian repression disposes of unacceptable material.

Through the symbolic order, individuals negotiate their identities and perceptions of reality, often influenced by both personal experiences and societal constructs. Lacan's insights thus illuminate how trauma narratives in fiction can reflect and distort aspects of real-life trauma, offering readers and authors alike a framework to interpret the complexities of psychological suffering and identity formation.

Paul's prescience dismantles the illusion of autonomy. Unlike the traditional hero who exercises free will to shape their destiny and even the world around him, Paul's journey is marked by the collapse of certainty. The world is shaping Paul Atreides even before his birth. Everything that has happened in the world and at the time Paul was a member of the world of *Dune* already established how the protagonist was going to act and how his identity would become. His foresight does not liberate him but instead entraps him within a deterministic universe governed by the intersecting systems of the Bene Gesserit's breeding program, the Fremen's religious mythology, and the ecological significance of spice production on Arrakis.

The prescience, he realized, was an illumination that incorporated the limits of what it revealed- at once a source of accuracy and meaningful error. A kind of Heisenberg indeterminacy intervened: the expenditure of energy that revealed what he saw, changed what he saw. And what he saw was a time nexus within this cave, a boiling of possibilities focused here, wherein the most minute action - the wink of an eye, a careless word, a misplaced grain of sand - moved a gigantic lever across the known universe. He saw violence with the outcome subject to so many variables that his slightest movement created vast shiftings in the patterns. (*Dune*, Frank Herbert, 364)

The passage aligns with Lacan's theory of the mirror stage and the symbolic order. Paul's prescience acts as a mirror reflecting a fragmented self, where every decision and movement is imbued with cosmic insignificance. This reflects Lacan's notion of the "alienating identity", as Paul's self-image is constructed through the roles imposed upon him by Fremen mythology, Imperial politics, and Bene Gesserit prophecy. Throughout his journey, Paul Atreides is experiencing every fiction that he has built up as fiction and through prescience, he witnesses how their safety net is pulled away, ultimately letting his world fall apart.

It should be clearly stated that at the heart of *Dune* lies Paul Atreides, even though the author wouldn't want this kind of analysis—or rather, wouldn't want a figure like Paul Atreides

to lie at the heart of anything. However, he is a figure whose shifting identities—the son of the Duke, Muad'Dib, Usul, and Lisan al-Gaib—reflect the complex interplay between personal transformation and the weight of historical forces. Through Paul's journey, Herbert crafts a narrative that reveals the fracturing of identity and the traumatic consequences of fulfilling roles imposed by cultural, religious, and political systems. This fragmentation and internal turmoil mirror the postmodern concern with the common man by emphasising collective suffering and systemic issues rather than celebrating a singular saviour. There are arguments for the integration of the monomyth and the theory presented by Joseph Campbell that can be applied in *Dune*; however, the sequel was written specifically to illuminate that Paul Atreides is, in fact, not a heroic figure or a protagonist in the traditional sense. *Dune Messiah* and the following novels in the *Dune Chronicles* not only shift Paul's role from a protagonist to a mentor for his son, Leto II, but they constantly shape his identity and further deconstruct his role.

Paul begins his journey with the first label applied to his persona: the son of the Duke. Early on, we see that House Atreides values the common man and traditional ideas of family values, honour, and leadership. Early on, we witness a contrast between the relationship of Paul Atreides with his father, Duke Leto and his mother Lady Jessica, who was trained as a Bene Gesserit. There is a clear understanding that Paul has a better relationship with his father, and this emphasis will help us understand the ultimate drive for revenge that Paul Atreides has. The Bene Gesserit training that he goes through, forced by his mother and the *gom jabar* scene, the test to determine whether he is "human or not" at the beginning of the novel, shows a predetermined future for the protagonist and foreshadows prophecies. Even though the *gom jabar* tests him, thus his resistance to pain increases, the foundation of leadership, honour, family values, and power is ultimately shattered, as well as his identity due to the ultimate betrayal of the Harkonnens and the Imperium. This event leads to the death of his father and the loss of power and influence within Arrakis.

This traumatic event marks the first rupture in Paul's identity, severing him from the stability of his past. Typical of trauma theory, there is always a contrast made between a pre-trauma identity and a post-trauma identity. Reflecting on his father's teachings, Paul muses, "My father... told me that respect for the truth comes close to being the basis for all morality" (255). These words foreshadow the instability that will define Paul's subsequent transformations. Like his identity, the truth becomes a shifting construct, constantly redefined by the traumatic and historical forces shaping his journey. It is also important to mention that throughout *Dune* and *Dune Messiah*, Paul often contemplates and thinks about his father. It is also worth noting that Paul becoming a tyrant was solely due to his need for revenge.

Paul's adoption of the name "Muad'Dib" signifies a pivotal shift in his identity. As he integrates into the Fremen society, he assumes this title, which ties him to their mythology and leadership. Muad'Dib (meaning "desert mouse") is not merely a name but a symbol of Paul's role in fulfilling the prophecy seeded by the Bene Gesserit. The desert mouse is a creature in Arrakis that seems to survive every calamity on the planet, mirroring the survival of the heir of House Atreides. While this identity provides him with the means to unite the Fremen and challenge the Harkonnens, it also binds him to a destiny he cannot escape. Paul recognizes the terrifying implications of his new role, contemplating before the final moments of his battle with Feyd-Rautha: "Even the faint gaps were closed now. Here was the unborn jihad, he knew. Here

was the race consciousness that he had known once as his own terrible purpose” (594) As Muad'Dib, Paul becomes a vessel for collective consciousness and historical inevitability. His prescient visions reveal the Jihad – a violent cascade of events that he cannot prevent. This foreknowledge fractures Paul's sense of agency, as his every action seems to perpetuate the outcome he wishes to avoid.

In contrast with the name he chooses, the Fremen give Paul the name Usul, a title that signifies acceptance within their culture. This name is mostly used by Chani (Paul's lover) and Stilgar (Paul's advisor and friend) suggesting a more intimate nature that is in opposition with the grandeur of Muad'Dib. Yet, even his intimate connection is overshadowed by the weight of Paul's broader roles. While Usul ties Paul to the Fremen as one of their own, it cannot shield him from the alienation caused by his prescience and the expectations of the prophecy. This duality reflects the tension between Paul's personal desires and the collective demands placed upon him. As Lorenzo DiTommaso observes, Paul's roles as Duke and Prophet create a dynamic where individual agency is subsumed by collective expectation. Usul, though personal, exists within this tension, highlighting the impossibility of reconciling Paul's private self with his public responsibilities.

Referring to Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Frank Herbert exemplifies the dynamic engagement with history, parody and representation. Rather than outright rejecting historical narratives, *Dune* incorporates and critiques them, revealing their ideological and constructed nature. Through the Fremen's collective fantasy of liberation and Paul Atreides' role as a messianic figure, Herbert constructs a narrative that intertwines trauma, identity and systemic oppression, positioning *Dune* as a deeply political and historical work that questions its own narrative structures.

Hutcheon identifies postmodernism as fundamentally paradoxical, employing historical narratives through a parodic lens that “uses and abuses, installs and then subverts convention” (*The Politics of Postmodernism*, 180). In parallel, *Dune* weaves together the mythologies of the Fremen, the ideological manipulation of the Bene Gesserit and the seemingly feudal politics of the Imperium that contrasts the sci-fi setting of the novels. The Fremen are described as ever oppressed people: both politically, religiously and ecologically (either by the rulers of Arrakis or the desert planet itself). They have a whole economic system based on the amount of water that each Fremen possesses. This could only mean a profound psychological and cultural trauma that is deeply rooted in their society. Their belief in the Lisan al-Gaib, a prophesied saviour seeded by the Bene Gesserit's Missionaria Protectiva, is both empowering and profoundly artificial and serves as a coping mechanism. In reality it is only a form of denial as it is reflected by what Cathy Caruth describes trauma as a “symptom of history” where the recurrence of suffering implicates both the oppressed and the structures that perpetuate their oppression. The Fremen's violent resistance, framed as an act of liberation, is thus fraught with contradictions, as it perpetuates cycles of trauma instead of breaking them. It is heavily described in *Dune Messiah* how Paul's jihad massacred entire planets, weaving a religious warfare to those who would not bow to Muad'Dib. Thus, from ever oppressed people they turn to oppressors.

Paul Atreides, as the focal point of the Fremen's collective fantasy, encapsulates the postmodern critique of historical narratives. His role as the Lisan al-Gaib reveals how historical and cultural constructs manipulate identity and agency. Although Paul initially uses the Fremen's

religious fervour to secure his political goals, he ultimately becomes a prisoner of the very mythologies he exploits. His prescience allows him to foresee the Jihad, a violent expansion of the Fremen's cause across the universe, yet he is powerless to prevent it. In a moment of despair, Paul reflects on the inevitability of the Jihad: "I cannot do the simplest thing without it becoming a campaign. My smallest acts are critical actions that could precipitate a flood." (*Dune*, 478). This admission underscores the cyclical nature of trauma and the impossibility of controlling historical forces once they are set into motion. Paul's prescient visions highlight this cyclical nature, as he foresees that his leadership will not bring peace but an unending spiral of violence and devastation.

Herbert's construction of the Fremen's identity and their collective fantasy also resonates with a schizo-analytic perspective, which views art and culture as flows of desiring production capable of disrupting codified structures. The Fremen's cultural myths and their violent uprising can be interpreted as a flow of resistance against the systemic oppression of the Imperium. However, this resistance is not entirely liberatory. While it disrupts the existing power structures, it also reifies new forms of control and domination, as exemplified by Paul's eventual rise to Emperor. The collective fantasy of the Fremen, therefore, becomes a double-edged sword: it enables their resistance but also perpetuates the trauma and cycles of power that define their oppression. In modern-day politics, like the Fremen's veneration of Paul, we see an ongoing trend of misinformation, conspiracy theories and further illusions cast upon the people with figures such as Elon Musk and Donald Trump in the United States and Georgescu in Romania. These messianic archetypes reflect the role of spectacle in consolidating power. Paul Atreides' rise to power often involved specific rituals that were rooted in Fremen culture that reinforced his divine status, whereas in modern day politics, we see the polished images and advertisements of these political "personas". Vlad's argument that postmodern scepticism fosters a "culture of paranoia" that sees "institutionalized secrecy as immune to democratic control" applies directly to the way populist leaders frame themselves as the only ones capable of exposing and defeating hidden enemies. Trump, for instance, built his political brand on the idea that a "deep state" was working against him, while European populists like Georgescu present themselves as the last line of defense against Western liberal hegemony.

The role of fantasy is a crucial aspect of Lacanian theory, particularly in understanding how individuals navigate the complexities of desire and subjectivity. Fantasy serves as a crucial mechanism through which individuals attempt to manage the inherent tensions and contradictions of the human condition, including the encounter with the Real and the pursuit of the objet petit a. Lacan first comments on the role of fantasy in one of his early seminars, particularly on the complex role of fantasy in the formation of subjectivity and the dynamics of psychoanalytic treatment. In *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book 1: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, Lacan when discussing the author's bases of analysis, states that:

In their view, this fantasised understanding should, little by little, within the day-to-day experience taking place in the consulting room, boil down, transform itself and achieve a new equilibrium within a given relation to the real. What is emphasized here, as you see, in clear contrast to Freud, is the transformation of the fantasised relation in the course of a relation which one calls, without further ado, *real*. (14)

Thus, fantasy, according to Lacan, serves as a mechanism to mediate the tensions between the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. It provides a framework through which

individuals attempt to manage their desires and make sense of their place in the world. For the Fremmen, the fantasy of Muad'Dib and Lisan al-Gaib offers a way to structure their existence within the chaos of the Imperium and the possibility of a prosperous future. However, this fantasy ultimately collapses under the weight of the Real, exposing the void that underlies their constructed identities. The Real is not the void that lies at the bottom of the unconscious, it is the realization that there may be nothing there to begin with, thus the impossibility of crafting a narrative surrounding an individual or a nation. Lacan's insight that "desire is the metonymy of the lack in being" resonates with Paul's realization that each new identity fails to fill the void created by his trauma.

Vlad's discussion of the decentred subject and the challenges to the liberal humanist self provides a helping hand in understanding why the narrative around "great men" is so appealing to the masses. Vlad emphasizes that identity is constructed within narratives that negotiate both individual and collective experiences rather than existing as an essential, stable entity. He writes, "Within and through narratives, negotiations of individual and group identities are conducted, apparently proclaiming a truth that is hard to acknowledge by traditional authors" (*Challenging Identities*, 77). This perspective is crucial for understanding Paul Atreides, whose shifting identities exemplify a subject constantly redefined by the structures that shape him. Paul's selfhood does not emerge from an inherent essence but from the sociopolitical and religious forces that construct him as a leader, a prophet, and ultimately a messianic figure. In *Dune*, Paul's prescience initially suggests control over his fate, but as it was already discussed his ability ultimately reveals his entrapment within a historical inevitability he cannot escape. Vlad's assertion that "the self is commonly perceived in social identity theories in the interaction between the I and the Me" (78) fits perfectly with the idea that Paul's self-perception is constantly at odds with how he is perceived by the Fremmen, the Imperium, and history itself.

In modern-day politics, the narrative around "great men" is elevated as the ultimate solution to societal crises. As previously stated, figures like Donald Trump, Viktor Orban, Marine Le Pen, or even Calin Georgescu in Romania are all framed as saviours who will return power to the people, protect national sovereignty, and confront the perceived threats of multiculturalism, globalization, and political elites. Social media plays an important role here by continually misinforming the consumers to amplify their appeal further and resonate with the collective fantasy of their followers. In Europe, far-right leaders skilfully use digital platforms to bypass traditional media and connect directly with their base and similarly, in the United States, social media (most notably the platform "X", owned by Elon Musk, someone who publicly announced his war against "the woke virus") serves as a voice for right-wing leaders, enabling the spread of conspiracy theories and anti-establishment messaging. The construction of such figures relies on the same mechanisms that turn Paul into Lisan al-Gaib: the invocation of a lost golden age, the promise of salvation, and the necessity of a strong leader to reclaim a fractured society. Vlad discusses how narratives serve to mediate identity by constructing recognizable real-world frameworks that, while appearing authentic, are ultimately constructed through discourse. Right-wing populists capitalize on this same dynamic, positioning themselves as "voices from the outer world" who promise to restore an idealized national identity that has been corrupted by external forces.

According to Lacan, imagination both creates and hides the emptiness it claims to fill. This paradox is best illustrated by Paul's prescience. Although it gives him apparent power over what happens in the future, it also forces him to face the reality of historical determinism: the Jihad's inevitable outcome. His observation that "the expenditure of energy that revealed what he saw changed what he saw" embodies this contradiction and draws attention to the Heisenberg-like indeterminacy of his vision. His foresight does not free him; rather, it traps him further in other people's imaginations, especially the Bene Gesserit's eugenic plans and the Fremen's aspirations of a messiah. This indicates that fantasy eventually functions as a system that conceals the actual horrors present in Fremen civilization in addition to being a coping strategy.

This dynamic can also be understood through Lacan's concept of the *objet petit a*, the unattainable object of desire that structures subjectivity. For the Fremen, Paul embodies their collective fantasy of liberation – a figure who symbolizes their resistance to the Harkonnens and the one who "would point the way" to a paradise, forever altering the planet they inhabit. However, this fantasy ultimately collapses under the weight of its contradictions. While Paul fulfils the Fremen's desires by leading them to victory, he simultaneously unleashes the destructive force of the Jihad, perpetuating cycles of trauma and domination rather than resolving them. The changing of Arrakis' ecology further changes the cultural facets of the Fremen. At their core, the Fremen are desert people; their whole culture is based upon oppression, scarcity, and survival. One simple example would be that their whole economy, which is based on water, is rendered useless since now their planet has an abundance of water. The *objet petit a* here is not Paul himself but the collective fantasy of salvation that he represents, an idea that sustains the Fremen's identity even as it leads to their complicity in the atrocities of the Jihad.

As a result, Paul Atreides exemplifies the concept of the decentred subject as articulated through the theoretical frameworks presented in the essay. Psychoanalysis, as well as cultural and individual trauma theories, serve their purpose in the further fragmentation of Paul Atreides through his journey of fulfilling roles and shaping himself by the world that surrounds him. He challenges the concept of a unified sovereign self by influencing his identity with external forces, collective interpretations, and unconscious impulses. Frank Herbert presents a nuanced depiction of identity as fragmented and relational through the protagonist. A significant aspect of Paul's journey is the tension between human agency and systemic forces. Identities are, thus, constituted in the "web of human relations," and Paul's role as Lisan al-Gaib is a product of this dynamic interaction. As such, Lacan's concept of the subject as divided and mediated by the symbolic order echoes Paul's entrapment in the expectations and beliefs of others and the limitations imposed by his prophetic visions. Ultimately, the comparison between Paul Atreides and "modern-day messiahs" underscores the promises of renewal and liberation entangled in the system that produces them. Herbert's critique of Paul's role as Lisan al-Gaib serves as a cautionary tale for understanding the limitations and consequences of placing too much faith in singular "great men". I have stated at the start of the article that at the heart of *Dune* lies Paul Atreides and perhaps that can spark controversy, but without a shadow of a doubt what lies at the heart of *Dune* is the need for critical engagement with the narratives that sustain such leaders, highlighting the complexities of power, identity, and collective desire.

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