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The Posthuman Fremen Society and the Nature of Humanity in *Dune*

“No more terrible disaster could befall your people than for them to fall into the hands of a Hero” - Dr. Pardot Kynes, *Dune* (1965).

Frank Herbert's 1965 sci-fi classic *Dune* poses an extremely interesting question: how far can humanity advance, or regress, while still remaining human? Herbert seems to argue that while many of his characters are seemingly alien and posthuman, they are still all human because they retain an arrogant, anthropocentric view of the universe. Though the people of *Dune* vow that “Man may not be replaced”, they are unaware of a posthuman society living right under their noses (Herbert, *Dune* 813). The humans of *Dune*, in their anthropocentrism, believe that they (as humans) are the ones with the right solution, and typically plan to achieve their goals by subjugating or manipulating other powerful humans or people they see as lower and more animal than human. Ironically, it is only the Fremen, regarded as the most primitive people by other characters, who seem posthuman in the novel. They act truly and purely for the benefit of the collective versus the individual, and along with this, they also acknowledge that the planet of Arrakis is not their personal domain, living in fear and reverence of the sandworms, whom they call the makers of Arrakis. By decentering humanity and making Arrakis and the collective their priorities above the individual, they have advanced beyond humanism with a new kind of society dominated by a new way of thinking and a new perspective on life and the world around them. These are traits that only begin to change after Paul Atreides, the supposedly noble and advanced

human, begins to take leadership of the Fremen and becomes their messiah figure, and reverts their society to a human focus, specifically with a focus on him and not Arrakis. This reversion robs the Fremen of their autonomy and uses their ideology of the collective good over the individual welfare to make them see their lives as pieces of Paul's greater plans. Paul makes himself their focus, and himself their collective, with him representing all they are and can be rather than the progress made on Arrakis and their support of each other, thus robbing them of their lifestyle, culture, dreams, and posthumanist mindset.

Before discussing posthumanism within Herbert's novels, it is necessary to understand some of the core principles of modern posthuman theory. In order to understand posthumanism, author Cary Wolfe first differentiates between humans and animals, stating that "'the human' is achieved by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether" (xv). Furthermore, Wolfe argues that it is not just our society or our bodies that need to change in order to be declared posthuman, AI and cyborgs are not enough, and he believes that "we must take yet another step, another post-, and realize that the nature of thought itself must change if it is to be posthumanist" (xvi). Finally, Wolfe states that the greatest sign of the advent of a posthumanist society is "a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, information, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore, a historical development that points toward the necessity of new theoretical paradigms (but also thrusts them on us), a new mode of thought that comes after the cultural repressions and fantasies, the philosophical protocols of and evasions, of humanism as a historically specific phenomenon" (xv-xvi). These ideas (specifically the idea of the decentering of the human) have a significant presence in *Dune*, as such, using the Fremen as a model for

posthumanism, it becomes clear that Herbert is arguing the best future for humanity lies in abandoning our conflicts in exchange for our shared connections and dreams. He believes that there is no need for cyborgs or robots or ai, but just a shift in how we think about our world and about each other.

If a posthuman society is marked by a shift in which humans are no longer the center in which all else is measured against, defined by, or given priority in comparison, then when did this shift occur within the Fremen? The answer is around the year 10151 AG (After Guild, when the Spacing Guild became the only means of interstellar travel after the Butlerian Jihad and the removal of thinking machines from human society), almost 40 years before Paul Atreides first came to Arrakis when his family was granted it as a fief by the Padishah Emperor Shaddam IV (McNelly ix, 28). This is the time when Imperial Planetologist (or ecologist) Dr. Pardot Kynes first met with the Fremen, and after studying the planet for many years, he had become convinced that not only was there enough water trapped below the surface of Arrakis to create sustainable plant life and slowly terraform the planet from a desert wasteland that had never seen a drop of rain into a planet with seas and flowing rivers, but that only the Fremen were knowledgeable and capable enough to pull it off. Every other group was too busy worrying about profit margins to bother trying to terraform Arrakis, it was cheaper to just tough it out. Furthermore, the men in power running these groups such as Baron Vladimir Harkonnen or Emperor Shaddam IV were either never present on Arrakis or lived comfortably in cities without want of water. Only the Fremen had both the motivation, the necessary mindset, and the experience to turn Arrakis blue and green. When Kynes was sentenced to death to protect the location of the secret Fremen Sietch (a Fremen settlement hidden in the desert), his executioner chose to kill himself instead, and the council took this as an “obvious message from Shai-Hulud”

(the Fremen term for the sandworms, whom they both fear, ride, and worship) that Kynes was the man who could lead them to a transformed world (McNelly 28). Pardot's half-Fremen son Liet-Kynes would later take up his father's position as the leader of the Fremen and the leader of the ecological transformation. Once Pardot and Liet-Kynes planted this dream in the minds of the Fremen, their culture underwent a radical shift. Although their culture already abided by strict rules that favored the survival and well-being of the collective over that of the individual, this was now conjoined with protecting and accomplishing their shared dream. This is the moment in which the Fremen became the only posthuman society in *Dune*, not because of their biological or mental enhancements like the Spacing Guild or the Bene Gesserit, or because of any fantastical abilities to see through time and space like Paul Atreides possessed, but because they chose to decenter themselves, the individual humans, as the primary concern and focus of their society. Their priorities lay first in Arrakis, second in the collective, and finally in the individual, a decentering that juxtaposes not only the other human societies within *Dune* but also the other societies present on Arrakis, as demonstrated by what smuggler Staban Tuek says to Atreides commander Gurney Halleck, "Arrakis is our enemy" (Herbert, *Dune* 415).

The Fremen's path to becoming posthuman may have been laid out before them by Dr. Pardot Kynes and his son, but it was a path they were already walking. The original text is filled with scenes where the Fremen shock outsiders not just with their abilities, but also with their determination, and their way of thinking. One such example comes when Thufir Hawat, the Atreides Mentat, comes into contact with a group of Fremen while on the run from the Harkonnens. Hawat attempts to negotiate with the Fremen on several occasions but is unsuccessful, and the reasons why he fails are why this scene is perhaps the single greatest display of the Fremen way of thinking, and of their culture, and how it as a posthuman culture

and way of thinking compares to the other societies of *Dune*. The main point of tension during the negotiations is that Thufir Hawat wants to know if and how the Fremen will help care for his wounded, to this, the Fremen leader responds always with the same, simple answer: “They are wounded” (Herbert, *Dune* 338). When Hawat continually asks him to help his wounded, the Fremen assumes he means that it is time for a “water-decision”, and interprets Hawat’s confusion as hesitation, and offers to “take the decision away from [him]” (Herbert *Dune*, 339). Hawat interprets this as potential betrayal or a thinly-veiled threat. In reality, the Fremen truly is trying to help, but each seems to have a different definition of help, with the Fremen assuming he means they need his rendering gear, as they have none. It is Fremen custom to render the flesh of the dead for the body’s water, as their leader says “A man’s flesh is his own; the water belongs to the tribe” (Herbert, *Dune* 346). This is an excellent example of the Fremen’s focus on the survival and well-being of the collective over the individual, and also emphasizes their connection to and priority of Arrakis, because if the water of the flesh of the dead does not end up being drunk by another Fremen, it could end up being used in the basins and dew-collectors that helped the vegetation planted by the Fremen across the planet to survive (McNelly 29-31). In other words, their body’s water could literally end up giving life to Arrakis. This was also still further contrasted by the fact that Thufir Hawat was specifically asking for the Fremen to take care of his wounded so he and his remaining soldiers could go back into battle and try to assassinate the one they believed to have betrayed them. The line between human and posthuman is perfectly displayed here through the personal human vendetta of Thufir Hawat vs. the collective posthuman dream of the Fremen. But again, this is a posthuman dream that is destined to be usurped by Paul Atreides, and the first hints of the power of their faith are seen here as well. As of yet, the Fremen have remained uninvolved with the war between the Harkonnens and

the Atreides, and their only actions have been either under the express orders of Liet-Kynes or because they were forced into battle by Harkonnens. However, when Thufir Hawat mentions that he is in the service of Paul Atreides, their Lisan al-Gaib messianic figure, or as the Fremen puts it that he is “pledged to his water” that their attitude changes (Herbert, *Dune* 344). With their belief that Paul was the Lisan al-Gaib, the voice from the outer world, their “shortening of the way” to a water-filled Arrakis, an air of religious fervor sweeps through them, and they speak openly of killing their way to Paul (Herbert, *Dune* 212). Their zeal (and decentered human focus) is most poignantly demonstrated when three Fremen make a suicide run on an enemy troop transport, and following their sacrifice, their leader responds casually that it was “*A reasonable exchange*” of three men for three hundred enemies, an emotionless response made more understandable by his earlier comment that “Paradise were sure for a man who died in the service of Lisan al-Gaib” (Herbert, *Dune* 351, 345). This is a chilling example of the resiliency of humanism and anthropocentric thought, as well as how easily it can overtake a collective, posthumanist mindset, as the legends planted by the human Bene Gesserit Missionaria Protectiva would be manipulated by Paul to cause a resurgence in a humanist mindset that he could manipulate.

The only reason that Paul Atreides was able to command the Fremen to battle against the Harkonnens was because they believed that “Liet-Kynes, who had promised us a paradise upon our planet, blessed him”, and because his abilities and actions matched with those of the legend of the Mahdi, or “The One Who Will Lead Us to Paradise”, planted by the Bene Gesserit Missionaria Protectiva amongst them (Herbert, *Dune Messiah* 52; McNelly 370). Above all, however, they fought alongside him because of his promise that “from the throne... [he] could make a paradise of Arrakis with the wave of a hand” (Herbert, *Dune* 361). In the end, it was this promise that sealed the Fremen’s belief that he was the Mahdi, and his promise to transform their

world for them led to them worshipping him and dying for him in droves, as Paul slowly shifted their center from Arrakis to himself in order for him to get his revenge and the title of Emperor. Even when Paul sees how his power and his choices are affecting one of his closest friends and a secondary father figure Stilgar, he still doesn't stop himself, or question if he should have chosen another path, "In that instant, Paul saw how Stilgar had been transformed from the Fremen naib [leader] to a *creature* of the Lisan al-Gaib, a receptacle for awe and obedience. It was a lessening of the man, and Paul felt the ghost-wind of the jihad in it. *I have seen a friend become a worshiper*, he thought." (Herbert, *Dune* 762). While Paul may have immersed himself in Fremen culture, he never adopted their posthumanist mindset, as this wouldn't have enabled him to manipulate them as he needed to. Because of this, he focuses on the change within his friend Stilgar and doesn't appear to notice how the change within Stilgar is representative of the destruction of the Fremen's posthumanist mindset and culture. It's also worth noting that while Pardot and Liet Kynes promised to transform Arrakis, they were not worshipped as Paul was. Paul was only able to manipulate the Fremen as he did by taking advantage of the planted legends, the bastions of humanist thought, and by instilling within the Fremen his own desire for power, and the idea that Arrakis was rightfully theirs, thus stripping away their belief that they shared the planet. This is why the final scene of the novel is not one of triumph but one filled with an air of dread and the religious awe of the Fremen, as well as a particularly ironic moment where Paul tells the Bene Gesserit that he will not be controlled by them, all while using the legends planted by the Bene Gesserit to control the Fremen into doing his bidding (Herbert, *Dune* 775).

So, if it is the Fremen of all people who are the only true posthumans present within *Dune*, why is this significant? Furthermore, what does it say that the only posthumans become

pawns in the hands of Paul Atreides? As mentioned previously, the Fremen are widely seen as an incredibly primitive and animalistic people, because they were confined to the deserts, and not the cities, of only one planet, held no power in the economy, did not belong to a noble house, and played no role in the larger politics of the Imperium. Therefore, it's fair to say that Herbert is arguing that the path to posthumanism and the path to power do not intersect, but are distinct from one another. Also, because the Fremen have no need for spice-based enhancements or technology, he is also proposing that the path to posthumanism is not one of technological enhancements, but rather one of connection. A greater connection to each other and to nature, reasserting the importance of Wolfe's ideas of the decentering of the human and how that leads to new ways of thinking. Herbert is asking his readers "why does humanity have to be the focus?" By putting themselves second, and seeing their lives through the lens of their environment, the Fremen came closer than any other group to accomplishing their goals singlehandedly. Herbert also stresses that this decentering of humanity need not come with a loss of human connection. Though the Fremen were seen as callous and lacking empathy by outsiders, as demonstrated by Thufir Hawat's encounter with the Fremen previously described, this is merely a misunderstanding of their cultural values. The Fremen were completely and totally loyal to each other and valued their lives, they simply understood that due to the harsh nature of life on their planet that their lives could end at any moment, and that death was inevitable, or even necessary, in their journey to terraform Arrakis. Paul Atreides, the man who destroyed the posthuman Fremen lifestyle, wished for a return to the way he used to live with the Fremen before he became emperor, as he proclaimed "They'd never needed snoopers [a device used to detect poison] in the desert days!" (Herbert, *Dune Messiah* 31). The Fremen have no crime, no betrayal, and only their shared dream uniting them as one. Herbert argues that to



change how we think is to change who we are, and not the other way around. Above all, Herbert believes that heroes or powerful men are the greatest obstacles to humanity's future. This is shown through how the Fremen change under Paul's leadership, how he twists their focus on the collective to remove their individuality and dangles above their head the promise of a terraformed Arrakis to use them to accomplish his goals. Through this Herbert is arguing that such a posthumanist society must be ever vigilant, lest the shadow of humanism be cast over it by a towering hero and use its values against itself, to twist it from the inside out into a mockery of its former self. Such a transformation may be one that is impossible to recover from, especially with the dream of the Fremen now entangled with the promises of Paul.

Many have read *Dune* as the tragedy of young Paul Atreides, a man able to see the bloody future that lay ahead of him, yet powerless to prevent it. However, the true tragedy of this novel lies within the dream of the Fremen. Although it would eventually be accomplished, the price that the Fremen ended up paying was nothing less than their entire way of life. Arrakis did become a paradise, but the Fremen lost their focus on the planet, and on each other. In their religious reverence for Paul Atreides, their belief that he could accomplish their dream for him, they devolved from posthumans and became human, or worse, little more than slaves.

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