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Arabs in the Future: Techno-Orientalism in *Dune* Film

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my source of inspiration “my family” and

to everyone who believed in me

I dedicate this work to my family and my few true friends.

But most importantly, I dedicate this work to my grandmother, Oummi, the illiterate woman who fiercely fought for her four grandchildren to have the best education possible. I owe you my life and so much more. This work is a testimony for my eternal gratitude.

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Abstract

Tracing its roots to the aesthetic movement of Orientalism, the Western representation of the Orient has historically perpetuated stereotypes and cultural reductions, particularly in relation to Arabs. Despite the recent and speedy technological advancements in Arab countries, the emergence of techno-Orientalism presents a contemporary lens through which the Far East is depicted as simultaneously intelligent and culturally backward while the Near East, “particularly Arabs,” seem to be left out. This research delves into the persisting influence of Orientalist views in shaping perceptions of Arabs, even within the futuristic settings portrayed in Western science fiction. Using the science-fiction film *Dune* as a case study, which envisions a distant universe with a parallel to the Middle East, this study examines the concept of techno-Orientalism and how it correlates to the portrayal of Futuristic Arabs. The research seeks aims to unveil the nuances of the representation of Arabs and critically contribute to the discourse on cultural perception of Arabs in the age of technological evolution. Through a thorough review of relevant literature, and a qualitative content analysis that is adapted to provide a comprehensive analysis of the film, this study shows the persistence of Orientalist perspectives in the portrayal of Arabs in *Dune* (2021), despite the film's futuristic setting.

Keywords: Arabs, Dune, Orientalism, Techno-Orientalism, Sci-fi films

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General Introduction

1. Background of the Study

Back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and since the first interaction between the West and East, the one thing the East could not do was to represent itself. It was initially introduced and represented to the world through Western eyes when the first travellers from the West depicted the East through their written and visual arts. This was merely considered in the beginning an aesthetic movement, yet Edward Said's work *Orientalism* (1978) came to refute this claim and explain that these artistic works are Western products that play a main role in promoting inaccurate stereotypes about the East through the use of an Orientalist discourse. Indeed, Said explains that the essence of the relationship between the Occident (West) and the Orient (East) is othering the East by representing it in cultural traits and qualities different—and opposite—to the West. Being a part of the Orient hemisphere, Arabs are primarily represented through the Western lens as villainous, primitive, mysterious, spiritual, and exotic. In relation to Westerners, i.e., Europeans, who are represented as masculine, rational and superior, Arabs are feminine, irrational, and inferior.

However, the emergence of technology has affected many aspects of life since its first spark. Art was not an exception, for this reason, several artistic works tackled speculative or futuristic themes, especially within the scientific-fiction genre. However, technological advancement was portrayed as a phenomenon that is associated with Western culture exclusively. Based on the Orientalist discourse, the Orient is technologically underdeveloped and backward, for this reason, it was impossible to go hand-by-hand with this theme. It was like this until Japan challenged this concept when Japanese technology started competing with the Western one post-World War II (Morley & Robins, 2002). The emergence of technology in the Orient area led to the rise of “Techno-Orientalism,” which plays a pivotal role in othering any

type of technology that is not Western. The techno-Orientalist themes are mainly reflected especially in sci-fi films that depict the Orient technology, futuristic settings and speculative futures.

In 2021, the sci-fi film *Dune* was released, it depicts the speculative world in the distant future. The Fremen are a desert-dwelling people native to the planet Arrakis in the "Dune" universe. They reside in the vast desert region, thus the Freman's characters are a parallel of Arabs and Arrakis parallels the Arab region, the "Middle East." What triggers the attention is that even though the film is portrayed in a futuristic setting, still the depiction of Arabs in the future seems to be stuck in the past.

2. Statement of the Argument

The rise of techno-Orientalism and the emergence of sci-fi films that depict the futuristic world and societies raises the anticipation for a shift in the representation of Arabs in the future, diverging from traditional Orientalist narratives, especially with technological advancements in Arab nations. However, the release of sci-fi films that portray Arabs and the Arab world in relation to futuristic themes, like *Dune* (2021), contradict this claim. Arabs in the future are still depicted using an Orientalist lens and they seem to be left out of the technological race. Therefore, the research problem is devoted to examine how techno-Orientalism correlates with the depiction of Futuristic Arabs and why Orientalist perspectives endure despite the significant technological progress.

3. Research Questions

The research intends to rigorously address the following central questions:

1. How does the historical legacy of Orientalism play a role in shaping contemporary perceptions of Arabs in the Future in literature?

2. How does the phenomenon of techno-Orientalism manifest in science-fiction films?
3. To what extent does *Dune* reflect techno-Orientalist tropes in the portrayal of Arabs in the future?

4. Literature Review

The examination of the existing academic literature reveals a substantial body of prior knowledge that establishes a solid ground for this research. Firstly, scholars have scrutinized Edward Said's Orientalism and the representation of Arabs and Muslims in Western media (both written and filmed) through an Orientalist lens. Orientalism started as an aesthetic movement that examined the Arab, North African, and Asian worlds through Western eyes (Benromdhane Haouel, 2019). Most of the artefacts showed a fascination with the East, but also a reduction. They often portrayed Arabs and Asians in their works, written or visual, as villainous, exotic, barbaric, mysterious and feminine. On the other hand, Western culture was represented as masculine and superior. Secondly, previous literature shows that there has been an investigation into the rise and influence of the concept of techno-Orientalism in light of technological advancements in the Orient. It describes the representation of the East, particularly the "Far East" as terrifyingly intelligent as well as uncivilized and culturally behind.

In his Book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said explains how Orientalism and Orientalist discourse were founded. It started with the first interaction between the East and the West during the exploration age and colonial expansion. They played a significant role in the creation of the Orientalist view of the East. Travelers and writers started depicting the East through a Eurocentric lens which tended to portray it as mysterious, irrational, exotic, childlike, fantastical, "different" and opposite to the West which is thus rational, virtuous, and "normal." Said coins the term Orientalism to refer to authoritative discourse produced by the West and that represents

the East (Orient) in cultural traits and qualities different—and opposite—to the West. He explains that the West, by defining itself in opposition to the constructed image of the East and creating an inferior “Other,” reinforces its identity and justifies its dominance. In other words, this process of “othering” is a tool for maintaining and legitimizing power structures. In his book, Said discusses how Western literature and art play a crucial role in the construction and perpetuation of Orientalist ideas. These works created a distorted image of the East, like the “Imaginative Geographies,” which depict the Orient as a mysterious and exotic place oversimplifying and distorting the reality of a diverse East (Said, 1978). Moreover, Western literature developed an enduring stereotypical image of the East as a place of sensuality, despotism and mystery. Tropes like: the Harem, the Desert, the Despotic Ruler, etc became iconic images and symbols that are fixed in the Western imagination, perpetuating a limited and often distorted understanding of the East. Said also emphasized that literature and art are part of a broader system of knowledge production. Orientalist representations in cultural forms shape public perceptions, influencing not only artistic expression but also academic scholarship and political discourse. In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said engages in a critical analysis of some of the artistic works to illustrate and explain how they contribute to the Orientalist paradigm. Some of the works that Said used were Jean-Léon Gérôme’s paintings, Richard Burton's Translations, Delacroix's "The Women of Algiers," etc. By closely examining these works, he exposed the represented Orientalist stereotypical images and the Eurocentric perspectives and power dynamics embedded in them. He reveals how certain images and themes become ingrained in Western depictions of the East, and cultural products that play a role in shaping the Orientalist discourse and influencing public opinion.

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) can serve as a foundation stone in this research as it is considered the core work to understand, analyse, and criticize Orientalism and its roots and implications. However, the book was published in 1978 and has not been updated since. As a result, it fails to cover the technological advancements both in the East and the West that have

occurred after, and how they relate to Orientalism. For this reason, Said's analysis provides profound insights, but the absence of a nuanced exploration of technological developments and their entanglement with Orientalist perspectives is discernible. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Said's examination primarily encompasses traditional artistic mediums, such as written works (books) and paintings, thereby neglecting the expansive realm of contemporary visual culture represented by television series, films, and social media—the very channels that currently shape public opinion. Hence, an acknowledgement of these evolving dynamics is imperative for a holistic understanding of Orientalism in our present media landscape.

In *Global Media, Electronic Landscapes, and Cultural Boundaries* (1995), David Morley and Kevin Robins introduce the concept of techno-Orientalism. Based on their understanding of Said's Orientalism and the relationship between “the West and the Rest,” Morley and Robins discussed the wave of cultural paranoia concerning Japan and its technological advancement. The West, namely Europe and the USA, received the Other's (Japan) technological advancement with a significant concern, this was reflected in contemporary popular films like *Blade Runner*. This book explains how the West represents the Japanese and their technological advancement in their films with exotic and mysterious cultural traits, because Japan is calling Western modernity into question. As Said mentioned before that the “Orient” and “Occident” are man-made, Morley and Robins continued to say that the “Orient” exists because the West needs it to bring their project into focus; any modernity that rises in the Orient would create an issue to the occident because it means losing Western mastery. Japan created a panic because it no longer fits the established historical, geographical schema designated by the West and threw it into confusion, creating a panic of disorientation, if not, yet to be sure, of dis-Orientalism. To Western social science, modernisation has always been related to their hemisphere. For this reason, the emergence of economic power in a Confucian zone like Japan was difficult to tolerate because it called Western centrality into question. As technological innovation increasingly shifted towards the East, postmodern technologies have

also become integrated into the discourse of Orientalism. These emerging technologies have given rise to new manifestations of the contradictory stereotypes associated with Japanese identity and ethnicity, shaping a fresh perspective on Japaneseness. This was evident when Computer games started to be perceived as a part of Japanese culture like Zen and Kabuki; traditional forms of Japanese culture, which embodied the exotic enigmatic and mysterious. Japan is romantically idealized in postmodernism as a space between reality and imagination. Cyberpunk fiction, like William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, combines futuristic high-tech depictions with feudal Japanese imagery. This contributes to Japan's re-invention as a high-tech land with various and related elements, including manga, and the emergence of "otaku" (information junkies). However, there is a darker side to the wave of techno-Orientalism.

The association of technology with Japanese identity reinforces a perception of Japan as cold, impersonal, and machine-like. The otaku generation, immersed in computer reality, symbolizes this detachment from everyday life, embodying a cybernetic mode of being. This portrayal contributes to the dehumanization of the Japanese, depicting them as unfeeling aliens, cyborgs, or replicants. Despite evoking resentment, there's also a sense that these "mutants" are better adapted to survive in the future, which explains perceiving them as a threat. This techno-Orientalism is disturbing, as it reflects Western xenophobia and racism rooted in the cultural inclination to exclude, devalue, and hate the Other. The stereotypes of the Japanese as sub-human beings with no emotions serve as a mechanism for the West to fortify its perceived cultural and identity superiority. The imaginary Japan constructed by the West reinforces old mystifications and stereotypes, portraying the Japanese as barbaric and robotic, while positioning the West as civilized and human. Kevin Robins and David Morley's work plays a substantial role in introducing the new concept of techno-Orientalism. However, their work focuses only on the discourse that was produced in the Far East, particularly Japan, and it does not consider the remaining parts of the Orient.

Studying these works and examining their shortcomings provides substantial value to this research, which will carry on and illuminate the remarkable technological advancements in the Arab world. Additionally, it will delve into the portrayal of Arabs in the future, analysing its correlation with techno-Orientalism and assessing whether it has strayed from Orientalist rhetoric.

5. Aims of the Study

This study aims to understand the concept of Orientalism, its origins, tropes and impact on the portrayal of Arabs in films. Throughout the research, the study also examines the changes that happened with the rise of technology and the emergence of techno-Orientalism. Moreover, it delves deeper to understand the Techno-orientalist concept, how it has emerged and its implications in sci-fi films. Then, using *Dune* (2021) as a case study, this dissertation fills the gap in existing knowledge that lies in understanding how techno-Orientalism correlates with the depiction of Arabs in the future.

6. Significance of the Study

This research is among the few works that study the relationship between the portrayal of Arabs and techno-Orientalism. By doing so, it fills the gap in the existing literature that used to study the concept of techno-Orientalism only in relation to Far Easterners. This study offers future researchers and academics a new perspective on Orientalism, techno-Orientalism, and Arab portrayals. Drawing attention to the overlooked stereotypes in the depiction of Arabs in sci-fi films and futuristic settings, this work encourages people (filmmakers and viewers) to critically evaluate and challenge these stereotypes, thereby contributing to more authentic portrayals in the future.

7. Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative content analysis to examine the futuristic portrayal of Arabs in *Dune* (2021). Applying this method, the study scrutinizes the media representations in the film, including both visual and narrative elements. This approach intends to identify the pattern and themes related to the depiction of Arabs in future and its correlation with techno-Orientalism. The advantage of this approach lies on its ability to provide a multifaceted analysis, capturing both the visual and discursive dimensions of cinematic representation.

8. Structure of the Study

This dissertation is divided into three chapters. The first chapter “Arabs in Western Eyes: Unmasking the Orientalist Perspective” serves as a theoretical framework to explain the Orientalist discourse used in the depiction of Arabs through Western lens. It starts by defining the concept of Orientalism, then it traces back to its historical development, and finally, it navigates the Western cinema legacy in portraying Arabs using Orientalist tropes.

The second chapter “Beyond the Dune: The Techno-Orientalist Wave and Arabs in the Future” discusses the emergence of the techno-Orientalism concept. It begins with defining the concept, tracking its emergence, and examining its manifestations in Western sci-fi films. Lastly, this chapter investigates the Arabs' representations in Western sci-fi films.

The third chapter “Arabs in the Future Locked in the Past: The *Dune* Film as a Case Study” examines the representation of Arabs in the future in *Dune* (2021) and its correlation with techno-Orientalism. It starts with analysing some common science fiction themes in the film. Then, it examines the film’s characters and setting. Finally, it studies the manifestation of techno-Orientalism in *Dune* (2021)

CHAPTER ONE

Arabs in Western Eyes: Unmasking the Orientalist

Perspective

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Introduction

Throughout history, the relationship between the West and East has been characterised by a nuanced interplay between dialogue and conflict, which generated some moments of tension and others of cultural exchange. Amid this dynamic, a significant phenomenon emerged that played a major role in shaping the Western perception of the East for centuries to come: 'Orientalism.'

Initially, Orientalism started as an aesthetic movement that reflected the Western travellers and artists' fascination with the East, who sought to depict it through their literature and art shaping it according to their preconceptions and desires (Benromdhane Haouel,2019). However, in this relationship, the one thing the Orient could not do was to represent itself. Instead, it was invariably defined and introduced through the eyes of Western observers, perpetuating a one-sided narrative that often exoticized, essentialised, and marginalised Eastern cultures.

This chapter aims first to define Orientalism and delve deeper into its meaning. Second, it explores the historical origins of Orientalism and its evolution and manifestation. Finally, this chapter explains the role of Western cinema in perpetuating Orientalist stereotypes, examining how films have both reflected and reinforced Orientalist narratives, shaping popular understanding and perpetuating cultural biases.

1.1. Defining Orientalism

The understanding of Orientalism's meaning has significantly transformed over time, with Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism* (1978) playing a pivotal role in this paradigm shift. Derived from the Latin word *orient*, signifying the "East" or the "rising sun," Orientalism originally denoted a scholarly or curious engagement with Eastern cultures (Goode, 2010).

Alexander Towey, in his article "Orientalism Before and After Edward Said," (2018) elucidates that pre-Said, an Orientalist was characterized as someone with a deep interest in or academic pursuit of knowledge about the Orient.

Turning to the text itself, *Orientalism* (1978) is naturally focused firstly on defining the term. In the pages ahead, we will see the concept of Orientalism unfurled, investigated and critiqued. However, in his book *Orientalism*, Said firstly takes some care to help in understanding what he means when he talks about Orientalism. For Said, Orientalism is hardly a stage in the acquisition of knowledge. Rather, it is something more imposed: a way of seeing that is distinct from the mere recording of isolated facts (Said, 1978). This constitutes the act of 'naming' as an act of power, since to name something is to have power over it. So, what is Orientalism? Said redefined the term, shifting its focus from mere description to ideology, and summarizes it as follows: "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and (most of the time) the Occident (1978, p.2). Said uses the concept of Orientalism to refer to the authoritative discourse produced by the West that represents the East (Orient) in cultural traits and qualities different—and opposite—to the West.

Orientalism as explained by Edward Said digs deep into the polarity between the self (the West or the Occident) and the Other (the East or the Orient). Said's work explains how the West has historically developed a narrative of predominance and exoticism when speaking to and about the East. This representation is grounded in power dynamics, where the West positions itself as the standard against which the East is characterized as the Other. The West identifies by all what the East is not, the former is superior, rational, and developed, being quite the opposite to the latter. This self-definition justifies the Western imperialism and dominance over the East, which consequently maintains the power dynamics inherent in Orientalism. This binary view is a distortion of what the East and West truly are. The East and the West are not homogeneous entities, but diverse and complex. The 'Other' is not just a reflection of the 'Self's fears and

fantasies but has its own agency and voice. Acknowledging the broadness and complexity of each polar is pivotal for moving past Orientalist stereotypes and cultivating a more accurate understanding of the East (Said, 1978).

1.2. Tracing Roots: The Historical Evolution of Orientalism

In order to develop an elaborate understanding of Western perception of the East, understanding the historical evolution of Orientalism is crucial.

1.2.1. The significance of understanding Orientalism's development through history

Without adequate study of Orientalism's development on a historical level, one cannot deconstruct the intercultural exchange and the power dynamics that formed the relationship between the East and the West for centuries.

The importance of tracing the historical trajectory of Orientalism lies in exploring its first roots in Western thought and exploration. From the pre-enlightenment era to this very day, Western encounters with the East have been dictated by a complex interplay of cultural, political, and economic forces, often prioritising the West over the East (Said, 1978). The evolution of Orientalist discourse mirrors European hegemony and its constant change, from the early imaginings of exoticism and Otherness in the Enlightenment era to academic orientalism and the construction of imperialist ideologies in the age of colonial expansion. The historical trajectory of Orientalism explains the relationship between knowledge production, power structures, and colonial enterprise. To elaborate, academic Orientalism, rising as an academic discipline within the Enlightenment era, served as a legitimizing force for imperialism, giving intellectual defence for the oppression and subjugation of Eastern societies (Said, 1978). As European powers asserted dominance over Asia, Africa, and the Middle East in the middle to late 19th century, Orientalist scholarship became complicit in asserting racial hierarchies, white supremacy, and Eurocentric worldviews (Said, 1978). Besides, an appreciation of the historical evolution of

Orientalism is basic for examining contemporary cultural representations of the East. Whereas the plain colonialism of yesteryears may have wound down, the legacy of Orientalist thinking continues to shape contemporary narrative, media representations, cultural representation, and geopolitical strategies. By detecting Orientalism's roots, we will be able to detect and analyse the subtle, and often not so subtle, progressions and transformations that support contemporary Orientalist tropes, from the exoticization of Eastern cultures and traditions to the propagation of Islamophobic stereotypes.

To sum up, the historical evolution of Orientalism serves as an important viewpoint through which to examine the complexities of cross-cultural experiences and the persevering legacies of colonialism. To deal with Orientalism without recognizing its historical context is to risk propagating ahistorical accounts and fortifying the hegemonic structures that proceed to shape Western understanding of the East until this day.

1.2.2. Orientalism in Pre-Enlightenment

The Pre-enlightenment Orientalist discourse was mainly constructed by the influence of travel literature, art, and religious texts (Said, 1979). The idea of these far Eastern lands exotically described by the pens of orientalist writers served as a window into an unknown and interesting world. Works such as Marco Polo's *Il Milione* and, although not an orientalist, Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* drew Western readers' attention to tales of distant lands with exotic wonders and peoples with unfathomable customs (Irwin, 2004). Exoticism can be defined as the quality of seeming unusual or interesting, often because of associations with a distant country (Collins, n.d.). Although these narratives were primarily implemented for dramatic effect, they played a pivotal role in shaping Western perceptions of the Orient as a destination of boundless wonders and mysteries.

Also, art served as a vital medium through which Western imaginings of the East became palpable (Mack, 2002). Art portrayed in the exotic representations of the *Arabian Nights*

in European paintings and the delicate motifs garnishing Oriental carpets and ceramics, served as a mirror reflecting Western desires, fantasies, and fears in relation to the Orient. Through the lens of aesthetic representation, the East became synonymous with sensuality and exoticism, propagating persevering stereotypes that continue to live within the contemporary imagination. In addition, the role of exploration and colonial expansion cannot be downplayed in forming pre-Enlightenment perceptions of the Orient. The voyages of discovery embarked upon by European explorers in search for new trade routes and territories brought them face-to-face with different cultures and peoples of the East (Said, 1979). However, these experiences were often filtered through the lens of cultural predominance and ethnocentrism, driving to the construction of reductive stereotypes. Be it through documentation or storytelling, the idea of the Oriental "Other" as primitive, irrational, inferior, and incapable of self-governance started to crystallize in the minds of Western explorers.

As a conclusion, the pre-Enlightenment period laid the groundwork for the emergence of Orientalism both as a general discourse and an academic field, permeating the Western psyche with images and narratives that continue to shape their perception of the East.

1.2.3. The Enlightenment Era and the Emergence of Academic Orientalism

The Enlightenment period crossing the 17th and 18th centuries was a period of intellectual and philosophical advancement in Western societies. It had a significant effect on the evolution of Orientalist discourse. The Enlightenment era brought a shift in the way the Orient was seen, moving from a fantastical and exotic construct to a subject of scholarly study and examination. This period saw the rise of what Edward Said refers to as 'academic Orientalism' (Said, 1978, p.146).

Academic Orientalism in the 18th and 19th centuries was characterized by a precise and scholarly approach to examining the East. Orientalists aimed to classify, document, and analyse

Eastern societies, cultures, and languages. This was facilitated by the establishment of institutions devoted to Oriental studies and the publication of various scholarly works on the subject. Be that as it may, as Said points out, this scholarly interest was mostly driven by a crave to assert Western predominance and legitimize colonial rule (Said, 1978, p.191-192).

Many key Orientalist scholars had risen amid this period, each contributing to forming the Western understanding of the East. For instance, Silvestre de Sacy, a French linguist and the first modern and institutional European Orientalist, worked on Arabic literature, Islam, and Middle Eastern religions and was instrumental in establishing Oriental studies as a regarded scholastic discipline in Europe. Additionally, Edward William Lane, the English researcher and the author of *Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1860), is known for his detailed and comprehensive works on Arabic literature and Egyptian society. However, their works, whereas scholastically thorough, frequently strengthened stereotypical and reductionist views of the East (Said, 1978).

The development of academic Orientalism in the late 18th century played a noteworthy part in forming Western perceptions of the East. While it led to a more systematic and scholarly approach to examining the East, it also reinforced a binary view of the East and West, frequently to the disservice of the former.

1.2.4. Imperialism and Orientalism

The relationship between Orientalism and European imperialism is that of shared reinforcement. Orientalism, as Edward Said (1978) sets, is not just a passive cultural phenomenon, but an active construct that served the purposes of European domination. The 'Orient' was regarded as the 'Other' - exotic, backward, and uncivilized - opposite to the 'Occident' - rational, developed, and superior. This binary opposition advocated for the civilizing mission of European colonial powers as well as cultural ones. manifested in cultural imperialism.

Cultural Imperialism can be defined as the politically and economically dominant West imposing its own culture including language, costumes, and social and moral norms onto the typically non-dominant East (Petras, 1994).

Orientalist ideologies played a significant part in advocating colonial expansion and domination. The Orient was portrayed as a place that needed to be saved from itself, subsequently legitimizing the colonial undertaking. Orientalist scholarship painted a picture of the East as stagnant and unchanging, in need of the progress and improvements that the West may bring (Said, 1978). Orientalist scholars served colonial interests by constructing narratives of cultural predominance. Researchers like William Jones and Max Müller, while contributing generously to the understanding of Eastern cultures and languages, also reinforced the idea of Western predominance and the White man's burden. Their works frequently depicted Eastern societies as fascinating yet inferior, further upholding the power dynamics between the East and the West (Said, 1978).

All in all, Orientalism was not merely a reflection of European recognition of the East, but a construct that served European political and imperialistic objectives in the East. Which was to dominate the region culturally (Petras, 1994).

1.2.5. Critiques and Contemporary Perspectives on Orientalism

Edward Said's work *Orientalism* (1978) challenged the conventional Orientalist discourse. The Palestinian-American academic criticizes Orientalism as a framework serving Western imperialism, contending that it was not an objective field of study but rather a system of knowledge utilized to legitimize and sustain Western dominance over the East. He contended that Orientalist scholars, deliberately or unknowingly, created stereotypes of the Orient as outlandish, backward, and uncivilized. These representations, he asserts, served to strengthen the perceived superiority of the West and legitimise colonial rule. Said's work had a significant effect on academic discourse. It sparked a wave of postcolonial studies that examined the power

dynamics inherent in knowledge production (Prakash, 1995). His work pushed scholars and academics to fundamentally look at their own biases and the socio-political and historical contexts that shape their viewpoints and consequently their scientific writings. By challenging the foundations of Orientalism, Said not only reshaped the field but also influenced a wide extent of disciplines, from literary studies to anthropology, resulting in a more basic and self-reflexive academia. His work proceeds to inspire researchers to challenge inherent and dominant narratives and opt for a more nuanced and unbiased understanding of the Other (Prakash, 1995).

Contemporary viewpoints on Orientalism proceed to alter and reflect the evolving dynamics of contemporary global power and culture. Said's critique proceeds to be considered as a foundation for anti-orientalism, in any case, new voices have risen, offering new insights and challenging thoughts.

A contemporary emerging concept of Orientalism is Self-Orientalism, where the East itself internalizes and replicates these Orientalist generalizations as a means of "Orientalising the Oriental" (Oakes & Price, 2008). This point of view goes to uncover the complex social transaction between the 'Orient' and the 'Occident' and the part of the East in framing its own image and identity both within the eyes of the East and the West. Another noteworthy perspective is 'neo-Orientalism', which is concerned with the Orientalist discourse post 9/11 (Altwaiji, 2014). Researchers contend that neo-Orientalism created a new binary of 'us' versus 'them', strengthening stereotypes of the East as a threat to Western security and Orientals as subhuman terrorists. Another perspective, which is the most vital one given the subject under hand, is Techno-Orientalism, which goes to show how Orientalist narratives have been transformed in the context of advanced technology (Rohet. al, 2015). Scholars present Techno-Orientalism as a discourse that propagates a dichotomy of 'advanced West' versus 'technologically backward East', reinforcing stereotypes of the East as technologically inferior,

whereas paradoxically also posing a threat to Western technological dominance (Roh, Huang, & Niu, 2015).

1.3. From Lawrence to Hollywood: The Legacy of Orientalism in Portraying Arabs

Transitioning from the realms of written and visual art, such as literature and painting, to the silver screen, Western art has significantly contributed to the propagation of Orientalist depictions of Arabs. Films in particular have compromised a larger legacy since the last millennium. Films like *The Sheik* (1921), *The Son of the Sheik* (1926), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *Aladdin* (1992), *The 13 Warriors* (1999) and more have played a major role in the depiction of Arabs as barbaric, savage, terrorists and inferior. This contributes mainly to the perpetuation of the Orientalist view of Arabs, as Gerbener and Grossn (1976) said: “Being exposed to too much television and film creates illusory perceptions of reality, mainly caused by the repetition of certain images in different contexts” (as cited in Eissa, Guta, & Hassan, 2022, p.16).

The images that have been created about Arabs through a Western cinematic lens did not introduce new portrayals but breathed life into those already found in literature, novels, and artworks. They were in the beginning a continuation of the portrayals of Arabs in literary works and travel journals. These productions were influenced by early explorers and travellers who journeyed into eastern lands beyond their own (Dajani, 2000).

To begin with, the portrayal of Arab lands often leans heavily towards exoticism, portraying them as fantastical deserts fraught with peril and mystery. In most Western movies; like *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and *The Sheik* (1921), the first representation of the Arab land begins with the scene that depicts the vast empty desert followed in the background with fantastical and mysterious music. Within this expansive landscape, Arab communities were often depicted as inhabiting a primitive and uncivilised existence. In the Disney movie *Aladdin* (1992), the residents are positioned in an environment lacking cleanliness and tidiness, appearing shabby and unclean. This reinforces the notion that Arab individuals are not regarded as refined

members of society (Gayathri, 2021). These images reinforce the Orientalist, Western stereotypes that depict the Arab land as an otherworldly place, detached from modernity and civilisation. Also, it validates the claim that the Arab land is a dangerous place. Djani (2000) explains that the desert is portrayed as belonging to the Arab people, with access restricted to foreigners unless granted permission by the Arabs—which mirrors the perceived exoticism and hostility of the Arab world. Moreover, the imagery of the Harem -a private space for women in the Middle East - was one of the other main images that was depicted in the Western movies representing the Arab land and culture. Films like *Kismet* (1955) reinforce existing stereotypes about Arab cultures as inherently exotic and sexually charged, contributing to the Orientalist discourse prevalent in Western societies. Rana Kabbani explores the constructed link between Islam and sexual decadence in her work "Europe's Myths of Orient," (1986) suggesting that the West invented these associations to maintain dominance over the East. She notes how travellers to the Orient often fabricated tales about the Sultan's harem, contributing to the perpetuation of the existing sexual stereotype associated with Muslims. These stories, compiled by Antoine Galland in 1704 as *Arabian Nights*, were not textual works originating from the Arab/Muslim world but were orally transmitted anecdotes embellished by Galland. Kabbani (1986) argues that these tales, predominantly shaped by Westerners, despite lacking substantial documentation in the Arab/Muslim context, have influenced perceptions of the East for centuries, notably shaping the writings of Romantic poets such as Coleridge and Lord Byron, as well as being adapted into films like *The Thief of Baghdad* and *Kismet* (Dajani, 2000).

Moreover, the portrayal of Arab characters in Western films is typically categorized into two overarching stereotypes: Firstly, they are often depicted as archetypal barbaric figures, portrayed as savage, ignorant, and childlike. Secondly, they are frequently portrayed as terrorists, extremists, and generally untrustworthy characters (Djani, 2000).

To begin with the first archetype, the Arab character is often associated with exoticism and sex. The 'Desert Romances' films like *The Sheik* (1921), *Sahara* (1983), *The Protocol*

(1984), and *The Jewel of the Nile* (1985) represent the storyline which established a cinematic trend that persisted for decades in which “*the Cinderella meets the Arabian Nights.*” (Dajani, 2000). In which, the Sheik (the Arab prince) becomes obsessed with the blond foreign woman and uses all means to get her. Meanwhile, the Arab woman exists in Western films as a belly dancer who is highly sexualised, passive and male-dominated. In movies like *Looking for Danger* (1957), *The Young Sherlock Holmes* (1958), *Son of Pink Panther* (1993) and even in the Disney movie *Aladdin* (1992) the female Arab characters are always characterised with highly sexualized clothes of a belly dancer. Tania Kamal El-Din, the producer of *Hollywood Harems* (1999), elucidates that Hollywood's portrayal of Eastern and Middle Eastern women conforms to the prevalent Orientalist notion, depicting the Orient as a captivating, alluring, and enigmatic realm. Consequently, numerous films have emerged showcasing harems or dancers. This depiction also reinforces the image of Arab males who are driven and ruled by sexual desires which reinforces the image of a chaotic Arab society that needs Western guidance and save.

Here comes the role of the Western characters who, unlike Arabs, are rational and can save the Arab land. This can be seen in the film *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) which unfolds against the backdrop of World War One, a period when the British fostered aspirations of Arab autonomy, hoping to incite rebellion against the Ottoman rulers, allies of Germany. Lieutenant Lawrence, previously stationed in Cairo, is dispatched to Arabia to assess the situation and relay information to the British Army. A learned scholar of the East, Lawrence swiftly proves himself adept in the desert, earning the trust of the Arab tribes. His mission is to unite these tribes, transcending their internal divisions, to confront the Turks and achieve independence. Lawrence's refusal to succumb to what the Arabs view as destiny earns him their admiration; they see him as one who has defied fate and lived to tell the tale. Once more, the Arabs are depicted as passive, awaiting a catalyst for action. Lawrence persuades them to undertake the arduous journey to Aqaba, a task previously deemed impossible for Bedouins. Not only does he lead them successfully, but he also navigates the Sinai desert to return to Cairo. Such

accomplishments might lead one to believe Lawrence is the prophetic figure destined to guide the Arabs to freedom (Dajani, 2000).

On the other hand, by the late sixties, representations of Arabs and Muslims had changed drastically. No longer seen as romantic and erotic, Arab/Muslim portrayals in Hollywood films were influenced by the politics of the day. Abdelmajid Hajji, a literature specialist has identified five significant occurrences that he believes have influenced how Arabs and Muslims are perceived, these include the creation of Israel and the resulting conflict with Palestinians, incidents like the Iran hostage crisis that pitted American law enforcement against Arab/Muslim terrorists, the 1973 oil crisis, the Gulf War leading to the emergence of Islamophobia, and the events of September 11, 2001. While none of these events alone caused the change in representation, it is the combination of such events that have molded American fears and perceptions of the region. Consequently, Hollywood's portrayal of Orientalist fantasies has become less feasible, particularly as American understanding of the Middle East often revolves around depictions of violence, extremism, and militancy (as cited in Woods, n.d.). Therefore, images of Arabs with guns and terrorists, civilian murders and bombers became the stereotypical norm. Compared to previous portrayals, there is a shift in the depiction of Arabs in Western films that occurred towards a more focused portrayal of antagonism. While Arabs had previously been depicted as antagonists, they were often portrayed as bumbling and comical figures. However, they have now evolved into sinister villains who are perceived as genuine threats to Westerners, both domestically and internationally.

These distinctly negative representations have become the norm in the film industry's portrayal of Arabs. In films like *Body of Lies* (2008), it starts by portraying Arabs as a menace to Western society. Despite the setting being in Manchester, England, the first shot introduces al-Saleem, who addresses his followers via a video camera. He claims responsibility for a past attack and threatens further ones: "We will avenge the American wars on the Muslim world. We will come at them. Everywhere. We will strike at random, across Europe and then America,

continually. We have bled. And now . . . they will bleed" (Woods, n.d.). Arabic and Islamic tropes like Adhan (call to prayer), Prayer, Takbir, men's beards and women's veils become synonymous with terrorist acts and extremism. In one scene in *Body of Lies* (2008), when the terrorists realise, they are about to be apprehended, they detonate the building while shouting the stereotypical phrase of Takbīr: "Allahu akbar" ("God is the greatest"). In *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), the call to prayer is strategically incorporated into the film to subtly highlight the Muslim faith of the terrorists. One notable instance occurs when Inter-Services Intelligence (I.S.I.) agents capture Abu Faraj al-Libbi, suspected of close ties to bin Laden. As agents strap what appear to be explosives to a courier's leg, they say, "You know how this works? God willing, we won't have to use it." The courier nervously approaches Faraj across a courtyard before being captured by agents disguised in burqas. Throughout this sequence, the call to prayer (Adhan) can be heard prominently, reinforcing the association of Islam with terrorism, suicide bombings, and violence. This use of the adhan in various scenes perpetuates a context where any instance of its sound is subsequently imbued with hostility.

In modern times, Orientalist fantasies still exist, in a less common way and often they have political undertones. The Arab world in *Aladdin* (1992) as an example is depicted as both exotic and menacing, referencing Middle Eastern politics. It evokes older stereotypes of mystery with its ambiguous historical setting.

Contemporary films often use past settings, to romanticize the East reflecting nostalgia for a pre-imperial era. On the other hand, the rise of the antagonistic Arab has led some scholars to argue that the "green terror" of Islamic fundamentalism replaced the "red menace" of communism as the new threat to the American way of life. However, others note that terrorist themes emerged prior to the decline of communism. Arab representation has evolved as a response to the political changes in the global landscape. Arabs start to be seen increasingly as threats to the American way of life. The terrorist image, in particular, has become prominent, much like how American politicians portrayed communism to justify foreign policy decisions.

The events of September 11, 2001, the Iraq War, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict have contributed to the global perception of the Middle East as a place of conflict. In the past, the Arab world was seen as dangerous but contained, allowing it to serve as a playground for Western adventures. However, as perceptions changed, Western culture reacted by vilifying Arabs to a greater extent than before (Woods, n.d.).

Overall, the Arabs' portrayal in Western cinema has changed over time due to geopolitical dynamics and cultural perceptions. However, Orientalist tropes persist in these representations highlighting the importance of being critically aware of the wider implications of Orientalism and its media portrayals.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the relationship between the East and the West was discussed through the lens of Orientalism. Tracing its journey from a historical fascination to a potent ideological framework, initially, Orientalism was driven by imaginations and ideals about the East often overlooking the voices and experiences of Eastern societies. Edward Said's influential work, *Orientalism*, shapes our understanding of Orientalism revealing how it perpetuated stereotypes and justified Western hegemony and imperialism.

The historical evolution of Orientalism starting from travel writings to its institutionalization during the Enlightenment period demonstrates how it was employed to legitimize rule and reinforce cultural hierarchies. This link between knowledge and authority endured over time shaping depictions of cultures in Western movies. These films continue to portray Arabs and other Eastern groups as primitive or menacing figures.

It is essential to grasp the context of Orientalism and its impact on media representations to dismantle these enduring stereotypes. By challenging and scrutinizing these

narratives we can progress towards an authentic appreciation of Eastern cultures' independence and autonomy.

CHAPTER TWO

Beyond the Dune: The Techno-Orientalist Wave and Arabs in the Future

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Introduction

It cannot be denied that Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) laid the ground for understanding how Western discourse has historically portrayed the East. Said's definition of Orientalism as the authoritative discourse produced by the West that represents the East (Orient) in cultural traits and qualities different opposite—to the West (Said, 1978) explains the depiction of the Orient as culturally backward and technologically underdeveloped through the Western lens. However, the rise of high technology in countries like Japan which is situated in the Orient hemisphere, has challenged the traditional discourse and led to the emergence of new narratives.

Responding to this shift, and based on their understanding of Said's Orientalism, the scholars David Morley and Kevin Robins introduced the concept of techno-Orientalism, which explains the new Western discourse that depicts the Orient in the context of its technological development.

This chapter aims first to explore the concept of techno-Orientalism and delve deeper into its meaning. Also, it examines the factors that contribute to its emergence, and it explores its manifestations in sci-fi Western films. Finally, it sheds light on the portrayal of Arabs within the realm of sci-fi cinema.

2.1. Emergence of Techno-Orientalism

2.1.1. Defining Techno-Orientalism

The term Techno-Orientalism, coined by David Morley and Kevin Robins in 1995, refers to the widespread discourse that demonstrates various stereotypes and distortions about Japan since the sixties. This discourse portrays Japan as a highly technological, dehumanized, and materialistic society. Techno-Orientalism, functioning as an orientalist discourse, has been established by the West as a dominant power-knowledge structure globally. It draws from orientalist knowledge about Japan and the constructed imagery of "East Asia" (Méndez, 2010). In other words, techno-Orientalism is defined as:

The phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo or hyper-technological terms in cultural productions and political discourse [...] that has become part of the West's project of securing dominance as architect of the future, a project that requires configurations of the East as the very technology with which to shape it. (Roh et al., 2015, p. 2)

2.1.2. From Tradition to Technology: Navigating the evolution of Techno-Orientalist

Discourse

It was 1995 when the term techno-Orientalism first emerged. Discussing the contrarian stereotypes in depicting Japan in their book *Spaces in Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries* (2002), David Morley and Kevin Robins highlight the change in the discourse portraying Japan from tradition to technology. Japan which is a part of Far Asia situated in the East (The Orient) was portrayed like the Arab region in the Near East as a land teeming with exotic individuals and items reduced to a single image of backwardness, extravagance and passivity. (Said, 1978, as cited in Lu, 2021). It was among the West's Others for almost five centuries, elements like zen, kabuki, tea ceremonies and geishas for example were considered a part of the phenomenon of aesthetic Japonism which was perceived as exotic. Simultaneously, Japanese concepts like kamikaze, ninjutsu, and samurai were seen as dehumanizing and violent acts that evoked fear. Japanese culture was perceived as an alien and backward culture until the rise of Japanese technology.

The emergence of new technologies in Japan to the extent that the US nuclear weapons industry is dependent on Japanese suppliers calls Western modernity into question and this has led to a defensive reaction from the West. (Morley & Robins, 2002). This reaction was according to Akio Morita, a former chairman of Sony, a result of the Western feeling that strangers, or something foreign, had entered their midst, which led to strong emotions of fear and anxiety (The Sunday Times, 1989, as cited in Morley & Robins, 2002). This is because technology has

always been a Western concept, as Corm (1989) explained, modernity has always been used as a "mysterious and magical word" that serves as a dividing line between the Western identity and the rest of the world (as cited in Morley & Robins, 2002). Thus, if the West is credited with the creation of modernity, it's important to acknowledge that modernity itself played a significant role in shaping the imaginary space and identity commonly referred to as "Western." For this reason, any potential rise of technology in Japan, the "Other" has consistently indicated a menace to put the West, i.e., "us" in danger.

Japan and other Asian countries have always created a panic in Western imagination. A common concept that was widespread at the time was "Yellow Peril," which is a dehumanizing and racist term that has been used to encompass and homogenize Asian people of various ethnicities based solely on the colour of their skin. It emerged as a response to the growing threat of the Japanese rise, yet this term refers to the threat of all Asian countries and by extension Asian people to the Western way of life, which is visible in numerous prevalent narratives, media representations, and political decisions throughout US history. At its most extreme, there's an image depicting Japanese and Chinese masses sweeping across Europe, trampling the ruins of the major Western cities, and eradicating civilisations that have grown weak from indulgence in luxuries and tainted by spiritual vanity (Morley & Robins, 2002).

As a result of all these historical changes, the discourse depicting Japan witnessed a shift from a traditional, exotic culture to a highly-technological, exotic culture that poses a threat to the West, referred to as techno-Orientalism. In light of this discourse, Japaneseness has become closely linked with high technology, and Japan is depicted as the greatest "machine-loving" nation, where machines are considered invaluable companions (Kato, 1991, as cited in Morley & Robins, 2002). The stereotypes of Japanese culture have taken on new manifestations, pachinko and computer games became the postmodern counterparts of Zen and kabuki— two distinct aspects of Japanese culture, and like traditional forms of Japanese culture, they also encapsulate the exotic, enigmatic, and mysterious essence of Japanese. Tokyo, Japan's capital for example

started to be perceived as the focal point for a new phenomenon of "postmodern tourism," representing the epitome of the modern decentralized metropolis, and Japan as a realm between the real and the imaginary (Thackara, 1989, as cited in Morley & Robins, 2002). However, a more resentful and aggressively racist aspect to this Techno-Orientalism is represented in the portrayal of Japanese culture as cold, impersonal, and mechanistic, which is characterized by authoritarianism and a lack of emotional connection to the world. For example, the otaku generation, described as youths "lost to everyday life" due to their immersion in computer reality, serves as a fitting symbol of this perception. These youths are envisioned as transforming machines, embodying a cybernetic mode of existence indicative of the future. This portrayal constructs the Japanese as inhuman and Japan as the alienated and dystopian face of capitalist progress (Morley & Robins, 2002).

2.1.3. Manifestations of Techno-Orientalism in Western Sci-fi Films

Techno-Orientalist tropes are commonly manifested in scientific-fiction films. This is because the relationship between sci-fi genre and techno-Orientalism is very intertwined. Tracing back to the historical context, science fiction became popular in the West during the Cold War, a time of tension between the US and the Soviet Union. During this period, there were negative feelings towards Japan and other East Asian countries in the West. These feelings influenced the stories and films being made, leading to what's called techno-Orientalism in films (Seed, 1999).

Western sci-fi films such as *Cloud Atlas* (2012), *Ex Machina* (2014), *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) and *Blade Runner* (2017) are among the popular Western sci-fi that employ techno-Orientalist stereotypes and symbols. These tropes are represented in the depiction of Asian cities as highly-technologized megacities, Asians as machine-like, and Asian women as objects (Jerng, 2017).

To begin with, Asian cities in Hollywood are portrayed as a mix of high technology and exoticism. Western Sci-fi films take place often in East Asian futuristic cityscapes filled with advanced technology. Simultaneously, these cities are characterised by distinct East Asian motifs, such as banners and signs written in Cantonese, reminiscent of densely populated, neon-lit East Asian metropolises like Tokyo, Hong Kong, Seoul, or Singapore. Forming a mix of high technology and exoticism, East Asia is portrayed as a threat to the West in sci-fi films, and the choice of the film setting plays a pivotal role (Yu, 2008; Park, 2010; Rogers, 2022). *Cloud Atlas* (2012), a film adaptation of David Mitchell's novel, published in 2004 serves as a good example. This film consists of six interconnected stories that span over different time periods. In one of its stories, it portrays the technological ruin occurring in East Asia, specifically in Neo-Seoul, a futuristic version of South Korea, in the year 2144. This plot follows the tale of Sonmi-451, a genetically engineered fabricant Korean woman working at a fast-food restaurant called Papa Song. Neo-Seoul that is considered as the story's setting, is depicted as a vast and vibrant metropolis with towering skyscrapers illuminated by bright neon signs in Korean characters (Hangul). This glamorous portrayal of Neo-Seoul is contrasted with the threatening view of buildings submerged underwater due to rising sea levels, referred to as Old-Seoul. The film portrays the perishing of Old-Seoul as a consequence of humanity's globalisation and overconsumption in a technology-controlled dystopia. The depiction of the story in South Korea seems to serve as a symbol to reinforce the vision of a threatening, foreign Orient. By portraying an Asian country as the epitome of a dangerous and dystopian future, the film constructs a consumable image of the Orient by emphasising recognizable Otherness, aligning with Western perceptions of East Asia (Shin, 2017).

Moreover, Asian characters in Western sci-fi are portrayed as cyborgs that are inherently robotic, and machine-like. They are labelled with characteristics nerds, workaholics, and competent yet socially awkward, unfeeling, cold, and anti-social, which reflect Western beliefs regarding East Asian culture and identities (Morley&Robins, 2002). In *Ex Machina*

(2014), the character of Kyoko is initially introduced as a Japanese woman who works as Nathan's live-in housekeeper, in charge of various household tasks such as cooking and cleaning. Kyoko's racialized body demonstrates the quintessential techno-Orientalist trope of the silent, obedient, servile East Asian cyborg. She is perceived as much closer to a robot even before the audience finds out that Kyoko is in fact a humanoid of Bateman's creation. The representation of Kyoko with racial signifiers like her yellow skin tied with technology reveals the techno-Orientalist constructions of her racial identity as inherently robotic. This portrayal is reinforced by the contrast between Kyoko the Asian, and Ava, the Western. Unlike Kyoko, Ava showcases her proximity to humanity through her linguistic proficiency, intelligence, and whiteness, Kyoko's artificiality is accentuated by her docility, obedience, and silence. Ava's warmth, curiosity, flirtatious nature, artistry, and kindness are all depicted in alignment with her whiteness. On the other hand, Kyoko's portrayal in the film consistently depicts her as indifferent, cold, apathetic, and even soulless. This characterization aligns with the techno-Orientalist construction of the East Asian body, often depicted as indistinguishable from robots. These representations in films reinforce and perpetuate harmful stereotypes about East Asian individuals and their supposed lack of humanity (Lu, 2021).

Finally, the objectification of Asian women represents a significant manifestation of techno-Orientalism in Western science fiction films. East Asian women have been consistently portrayed as exotic objects of sexual desire in the West since colonial times. They are represented in a hypersexualized image of a young, petite-figured, small-eyed East Asian woman clad in skin-tight clothes (Mulvey, 1975; Tseng, 2019; Tsang, 2020). Beyond their sexualisation, Western society tends to perceive East Asian women as inherently passive, innocent, submissive, and obedient—stereotypes deeply rooted in colonial fantasies of power and domination over the exotic. These portrayals not only perpetuate harmful stereotypes but also contribute to the objectification and marginalisation of East Asian women in both media and society at large. Kyoko from *Ex Machina* (2014) portrays this techno-Orientalist trope. In the film, she is

frequently depicted unclothed or wearing minimal attire, with her clothing—or lack thereof—defining her personhood, or rather, objecthood, solely through her yellow skin. Serving as Bateman's personal sex attendant, Kyoko's relevance to the plot is predominantly ornamental. Her existence is characterised as a literal tool for sexual pleasure, thus embodying her racialized figure as already existing as an object. Hence, she is depicted as always sexually available to the white hero. (Lu, 2021)

2.2. Exploring Arab Representation in Western Sci-Fi Cinema:

2.2.1. The Representation of Arabs in Western Cinema

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Western films tend to portray Arab culture in a negative light by either inverting or subverting reality. The industry provides images of the non-European as an "Other" in which almost any opposite definition of the self is possible. Various stereotypes often subtly or blatantly dominate most representations of Arabs by the West. These representations, earlier, before 9/11 often moved between two images according to the dominant social and political situation, it is either the images of Arabs as nomads or as palace Arabs. The first image portrays Arabs as primitive desert nomads, whereas the latter image cloaks them in the context of exotic luxury and decadence (Kolić, 2017). Both images are significant in their prevalence and relevance to Western films of different eras.

The most important images of the nomad Arab are the "camel jockey" or the "terrorist." The former image comes from the place of stereotype where all Arabs are Bedouin and still, to this day, are riding camels in the desert. This image has been played in many films ranging from the *The Sheikh* movie released in the 1920s where Arab men are portrayed as misogynistic and rapists (Ironically enough it was the white man) and Arab women as agency lacking (Moumni 2009) to Disney's *Aladdin* 1992 of which its opening song lyrics was later altered due to its Orientalist suggestions. This image of Arabs as “backward desert people” is not exclusive to

previous western cinematic works but rather still holds till very recent productions, such as *Dune* film which will be analysed in detail in the following chapter. However, it is also important to note that the terrorist image with regards to Arabs has been significantly magnified in post-9/11 American cinema. Most films dealing with political issues in the Middle East show the revolutionary Arab as a terrorist or an Islamic fundamentalist whose only goal is the destruction of the West. Hollywood narratives started to often reflect U.S. foreign policy and real-world terrorist events mainly starting the 21st century. According to Evelyn Alsultany, a leading scholar in the history of representations of Arabs and Muslims in U.S. media the Bush administration propagated the “they hate us for our freedom” narrative right after-9/11 and used this narrative to initiate and justify the War on Terror. This policy justified discrimination and led to increased prejudice against Arabs and Arab Americans, who were now seen as threats (Kolić, 2017). In a recent compilation of various films, a video entitled *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* depicts 17 specific Arab characters in the span of 5 minutes coming from different films. Although these characters have different roles such as sex offender or greedy Arab, each of the 17 images comes together in the portrayal of the Arab as a violent menace (Shaheen, 2001).

2.2.2. The Representation of Arabs in Western Science Fiction Cinema

Stereotypical portrayals of Arabs within the constraints of science fiction do not fall too far from the earlier and crude images perpetuated through earlier cinematic and television programs. Characters appear one-dimensional, found mostly as terrorists, sleazy salesmen, or abusers of women (Kolić, 2017). While the "good" and "bad" character roles are constant within Hollywood, the portrayal of Arab characters as primarily wealthy, hypersexual old men and young hysterical villains has further deepened Arab social anathema. However, Aysha (2020) argues that “[...] it is not so much the vilification of Arabs and Muslims in Western sci-fi but

how *unimportant* they are,” which goes to show that a considerable part of Arabs’ representation in western Sci-Fi is in fact no representation at all.

2.2.2.1. Arabs as the Villains

In many films that involve clashing of civilizations, there is often a "villain" who embodies the "other". Stemming from Edward Said’s thought, this character is generally an outsider from the civilization in which the film is produced, and as such, this character as "Other" is portrayed as being a threat to the welfare of the "home" civilization. If we continue with Said's idea that Orientals serve as foil characters, here we see the Arab being a foil for the "Western" hero. An example can be seen in the science fiction film *Iron Man* (2008), a film illustrating a hero figure (Tony Stark) in modern society. Iron Man is an embodiment of Western technological fantasy and progress. The enemy in this film is a group of terrorists from Afghanistan headed by a man named the Mandarin. Throughout the film, Iron Man is portrayed as being vastly superior and having too much progress in his technology for the terrorists to effectively deal with. This is contrasted with the portrayal of the Mandarin, who forms a supervillain persona with rings of power and plots of world domination. This character serves as a mere foil for the American hero. It is the embodiment of the Middle Eastern/ Arab as inherently inferior to the Westerner yet still a potential threat of power and control of the Western world.

Another example of this is in the film *The Mummy* (1999). Although not quite Sci-fi classified, the fantasy film serves as strong support to the previously mentioned points. *The Mummy* is a film about an ancient Egyptian priest, Imhotep, who is brought back to life and threatens to bring ancient plagues upon the earth and serve his own world order. Throughout the film, Imhotep is faced by a group of American heroes who endeavour to stop the destruction of the world and its people by the mummy's hand. The character of Imhotep serves as an embodiment of the West's

idea of the threat of the Arab's potential for destruction and power upon the Western world (Mecheri, 2023; Almansour, 2023).

2.2.2.2. Arabs as “Unimportant”

Even though it is tempting to only argue that Arabs are only vilified in Western SciFi, as it serves the general purpose of the study, it is important to note that a considerable part of the representation is deemed to depict them as “un-important” (Aysha,2020). The Arab character would barely make an influence in the development of the plot and would exist only for the sake of convenience or because the setting simply necessitates that. Aysha (2020) takes an example in Robert Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* and *Starship Troopers* (2014), where the image of Muslims in his world is positive. However, it is only to his standards, as they are always portrayed as the Assassins (Hashshin). That is, heterodox Ismaili Shiites who deviate from mainstream Islam by practicing adultery, having extramarital sexual relationships, heavily consuming alcohol, and refusing to accept the Qur'an as God's true and final message. Which made it quite fitting for his goals to pave the way for the upcoming prophet Valentine Michael Smith and criticise established religions. Moreover, another example is one that replicates the “white saviour” narrative, which is that of the Fremen in Herbert’s *Dune Chronicles* who, despite their important role in the development of the book series, never seem to “get their act together” unless the Agamemnon step up to their rescue (Aysha, 2020).

This kind of representation has a long history in the literature of the West, as John Carlos Rowe documents in his publication *Arabia fantasia: U.S. literary culture and the Middle East* (2012), and *Orientalism in Poe's Early Poetry* (2018). In Rowe’s research of Edgar Allen Poe in particular, it appears that, as much admiration Poe had had to the spiritualism and heroism of the Orient, his "romantic Orientalism seems more stylistic and rhetorical than a commentary on the culture, politics, and religions of the Middle East" (p. 3). Limiting once more the portraying of Orientals within no more than a mere aesthetic light (Aysha,2020).

2.2.2.3. Arabs beyond the Stereotypes

When it comes to science fiction as a cinematic genre, portraying certain peoples and geographies can shift according to what best suits the purpose of the work and the kind of futuristic setting the filmmakers want to put forward. For that reason, the representation of Arabs, as negative and marginalised can often be altered into a more tolerated representation. A good example of that is the *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* science fiction series where the character of Dr. Julian Bashir is depicted as an intellectual and a medical officer. Dr. Bashir's character breaks away from the traditional mould of Arab characters in western sci-fi cinema. His character shows depth and complexity and is integral to the storyline of the series, challenging usually apparent negative stereotypes with regards to Arabs.

Whilst *Star Trek* attempted to move away from negative stereotypes and provide a more authentic portrayal of Arab culture, it is important to understand and to not underestimate the seriousness of continuing to revive Imperialist narratives through negative and marginalised representations of Arabs and Muslims. Another aspect to be considered is that the representation of Arabs in Sci-Fi western cinema is one that can be directly related to politics, society and culture of the time. It is argued that the basis of Hollywood and cinema in the west as being ethnocentric and the lack of understanding of Arab culture undoubtedly leads to the negative portrayal of Arabs. With the current situation in the Middle-East, these films are not simply a response to the region but are also a perpetuation of propaganda emerging from western politics, to the people of the west (Shaheen,2001).

Conclusion

In examining the concept of techno-Orientalism and its manifestations in Western sci-fi cinema, this chapter has highlighted the persistence and evolution of orientalist discourse. Techno-Orientalism reconfigures traditional stereotypes, portraying East Asian cultures as hyper-technological yet fundamentally alien and dehumanized. Through a brief analysis of films

like *Blade Runner*, *Ex Machin*, and *Cloud Atlas*, we see how these narratives perpetuate exoticism and otherness, reinforcing Western dominance. Moreover, the representation of Arabs in Western cinema often oscillates between vilification and marginalization, reflecting broader socio-political biases. While some portrayals, such as Dr. Julian Bashir in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, challenge stereotypes, they remain exceptions.

CHAPTER THREE

Arabs in the Future Locked in the Past: *Dune* Film as a Case Study

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Introduction

In this concluding chapter, the themes, characters, and settings of the film *Dune* will be analysed to explain how they intersect with the portrayal of Arabs in Western science fiction and the concept of techno-orientalism. We will explore how the depiction of the Fremen, the desert environment of Arrakis, and the power dynamics between different factions contribute to the discourse surrounding Arab representation in media. By examining these elements, we aim to shed light on how *Dune* either challenges or perpetuates Orientalist stereotypes and the notion of Arab inferiority within the context of techno-Orientalism.

An Overview of the film *Dune*

Denis Villeneuve's epic science fiction film *Dune*, which was first premiered in 2021, is the first of two parts that adapt Frank Herbert's novel of the same name from 1965. Legendary Pictures purchased the film and television rights to *Dune* in 2016, and Villeneuve joined as a director in February 2017. This marked the start of the project's production. Production contracts for the movie were only obtained for the first part. However, the creation of a sequel was contingent upon its box office performance and revenue. The film required a budget of \$165 million and generated a revenue of over \$434.8 million.

The original *Dune* novel, which serves as the basis for the movie, takes place more than 20,000 years in the future. Frank Herbert was inspired to write the book after relocating to Florence, Oregon, and seeing the Oregon Dunes. Between 1963 and 1964, *Analogue* magazine published two articles that served as the basis for the first *Dune* novel. As more publications in the series have been released, it has become one of the best-selling science fiction book series worldwide.

The story of the film takes place in a far-off future 20,000 years ahead, and centres on Paul Atreides, played by Timothée Chalamet, a bright and talented, almost chosen, young man

who was born into a grand destiny that he seems to not fully embrace in the beginning. To secure his family, House Atreides, and his people's future, he must journey to the desert planet Arrakis, the universe's most hazardous planet populated by the Fremen—the planet's natives. Arrakis is the only source of "Spice;" a valuable substance that extends human life, enhances mental abilities, and the only means to navigate space. Nevertheless, ruling Arrakis is not an easy endeavour as other powerful tribes such as the Harkonnen try to cease the spice in Arrakis too.

The film's main characters are as follows: Timothée Chalamet as Paul Atreides, the heir of House Atreides who follows his family to the dangerous desert planet Arrakis. Rebecca Ferguson as Lady Jessica Atreides, she is Paul's mother, a member of the Bene Gesserit, an exclusively female group of humans with advanced mental and physical capabilities. Oscar Isaac as Duke Leto Atreides, the patriarch of House Atreides, tasked with overseeing the running of Arrakis by the Empire. Stellan Skarsgård as Baron Vladimir Harkonnen, the Baron of House Harkonnen, which ruled Arrakis for 80 years before being forced out by the Empire. Javier Bardem as Stilgar, The leader of the Fremen, a tribe native to Arrakis. Golda Rosheuvel as Shadout Mapes, the head housekeeper in the Imperial Residence in the city of Arrakeen on the planet Arrakis when the Atreides took control of that planet. Sharon Duncan-Brewster as Dr. Liet Kynes, a leading ecologist and peacekeeper between the Fremen and the Houses.

Frank Herbert, the author of the Dune series, was heavily influenced by the Middle East and its historical context as well as its geopolitical atmosphere. This influence manifests in his novel (as well as in the film) in various manners. To begin with, in one of his interviews, Herbert affirms that science fiction is not baseless and that his novel stems from an anthropological and a historical understanding (of the middle east). In the same interview, he mentions that water as a resource in Arrakis is a metaphor of oil in reality. Water in Dune is scarce and valuable just as oil is in the world. Also, Herbert shapes the Fremen as dark-skinned Bedouin-like people, resembling Middle Easterners. In another interviews, he describes the Fremen as people who are somewhat recognizable but who also come from a different culture than his. Herbert also wrote

Dune with the Messianic theme in mind which reflects his interest in the religious aspect of the region. The allusions to the Middle East in both the novel and the film are unmistakable, especially as the novel came on the heels of the oil boom in the Gulf states around the sixties.

In *Dune*, the development of the plot reveals how the East is consistently poorly positioned in Western Cinema. Paul Atreides, the protagonist played by Chalamet, is depicted as a saviour for the people of Arrakis, which is a repetitive White Man's Burden trope in Hollywood, while the "other" people are portrayed as lost and incapable of self-government and would welcome the new stranger leader without questioning.

3.1. Analysing Common Science Fiction Themes in the Film

The analysis of *Dune* (both the book series and its 2021 film version), by Frank Jacob (2022) showcases how the narrative tackles themes and symbols that resonate with techno-orientalism. Orientalism, as Edward Said defines, involves depicting Eastern cultures as exotic, antiquated, and fundamentally distinct from Western societies. In the film, these themes are evident through the subset of Orientalism; techno-Orientalism. Frank Jacob (2022) notes that Janet Kafka (1975), points out three evident themes that consistently characterise western SF narratives that appeal to the Western audience. These tropes, coated in Orientalism, are all implemented in the film's plot as it unfolds.

The first theme is Dictatorship and or Political Colonialism, where the relationship between Houses of the imperium and the indigenous people of Arrakis, the Fremen, reflects colonial power dynamics. The Fremen exhibit characteristics that are stereotypically associated with Orientals, the people are dominated by the Imperial Houses and their most sacred resource, the spice, is being harvested by the colonisers. Techno-Orientalism is quite evident in this futuristic and technologically advanced setting where the Fremen, as advanced, equipped, and adapted to the desert as they are, are still shown as backwards, superstitious, and most importantly dangerous. Imperial dynamics also manifest in the missionary work of Bene Gesserit

on Arrakis for centuries where they fed local beliefs that a saviour would come to lead the native people of Arrakis to paradise.

The second recurring theme in Western SF works is Maintaining a planet's ecological system; this shows in how the Spice is being harvested from Arrakis to be utilised in other Imperial planets to navigate the space and find new safe paths between the stars. Concerns with ecology also manifest in the scene where Dr. Kynes brings Paul and his mother to an old ecological testing station. She proceeds to tell them how Arrakis was meant to be tamed by utilising its underground water resources and turning it into a "paradise." However, shortly after, spice was discovered and the Imperium was no longer interested in the planet's ecological welfare. A historical parallel between Western imperialist exploitation in the middle east and The Imperium's control over Arrakis can be easily detected. In the former, oil is the sacred resource, whereas in the latter it is spice. Futo and Nasehi (2023) go further to make a similarity in the names of Arrakis the planet, and Iraq the middle eastern country.

The last SF theme tackled in the movie is The Spiritual Development of the Young Hero. Paul Atreides, who descends from both House Atreides and the Bene Gesserit and has more than one birth right, naturally ascends to the status of a messianic figure to the people of the Arrakis. In the beginning of the film, we see Paul as a young boy who is uncertain about wanting leadership but is pushed and encouraged by both his parents, Duke Leto Atreides and Lady Jessica. Both for their own reasons; Duke Leto wants an heir for House Atreides to lead their nation towards prosperity, even at the expense of the Fremen. Lady Jessica, on the other hand, believes Paul is the awaited Messiah to the people of Arrakis, "Al Mahdi" who is the product of centuries of cross breeding who is going to rule Planet Arrakis. With both visions at hand, Paul Atreides is destined to be the Fremen's "white saviour." Despite the Fremen being natives to Arrakis, and the spice being their own resource and their physical adaptation to it is shown in their blue eyes due to Spice exposure, they are yet to be able to self-govern and are in dire need of an outworlder leader to lead them. This narrative perpetuates Western superiority in an

evident techno-Orientalism trope; the Fremen, despite their adaptation to their land and their technological advancement are still shown as backwards and hostile in comparison to Paul and his people who are better equipped and more intelligent. Paul seems to naturally surrender to his destiny and grow from a confused boy to not only the man who is the Fremen's leader but also their long-awaited Messianic figure towards the end of the film when the Fremen accept him after he kills one of their fiercest fighters (Futo and Nasehi, 2023).

3.2. Characters

The nature of characters in the *Dune* film, their roles, traits, and the relationship between them represent Orientalist tropes and stereotypes.

3.2.1. The Portrayal of Great Houses as Superior

To begin with, the great houses: House Herokennes, House Attreides, and House Corrino and despite the big difference between them, they all portray the Western side of the world. They are all represented in the film as the superior side that is fighting for control, and characterised by highly advanced technology. Firstly, each of the houses has a distinct way of gaining control and authority. Baron Herkonnos, the leader of House Herkonnos uses the cruel approach, by frightening people, blackmailing and threatening them to ensure their submission to his will. On the other hand, Leto Attreides, the leader of House Attreides uses softer ways, by winning the love of his followers and projecting an image of noble strength. Even though their ways differ, the aims of the great houses are the same: power and authority. On their way to gain this power, they find the Fremen who are the original and native people of Arrakis, the planet which contains "the spice," a highly prized and addictive substance that is crucial for space travel in the *Dune* universe.

The relationship between the great houses and the Fremen is a superior-inferior relationship. In which, the three houses are the superior, this is represented in their dealing with

Arrakis as terra nullius—nobody's land—and as their possession. In the very first scene of the movie, Chani, a Fremen girl explains that her home “Arrakis” has been governed by outsiders since her birth. The emperor who is the leader of House Corrino, one day takes Arrakis from the Harkonnens and gives it to Attreides as if the planet of Arrakis is an object that is taken and given, neglecting its native people’s opinion. Arrakis, the home of the Fremen becomes Attreides with only a stamp, Leto Attreides inscribes the agreement and after he finishes, he turns to the emperor’s representative and asks him “So it’s done?” (Villeneuve, 2021, 00:10:12) marvelling at how easy it is. Secondly, the film portrays the three houses as technologically superior. They possess highly advanced tools and machines like giant spaceships, ornithopters which are the most common transport vehicles in the imperial and are also used for military operations, spice big harvesters and advanced shields which react and stop when they interact with weapons. Simultaneously, their military powers are depicted as very strong armies in terms of number, equipment, and military plans. The House of Attreides for example developed sign language that can be understood only by their followers. Finally, the great houses’ colonisation of Arrakis, imposing their control over its native population, and exploiting their resources is justified through their superiority lens.

Deeply rooted in the “White burden” trope, the great houses justify their colonisation of Arrakis as a mission to protect it and bring order and progress to it. This view is evident in their treatment of the Fremen as inferior, in need of control and guidance. In the scene where Leto Attreides is given the responsibility to govern Arrakis he says: “The Emperor asks us to bring peace to Arrakis, House Attreides accept,” (Villeneuve, 2021, 00:09:12) he also said when he met Stilgare, the Fremen leader, “The Emperor has given me Arrakis as my fief to rule and protect. I cannot promise to do not travel into the desert if the duty compels me.” (Villeneuve, 2021, 00:54:33). Therefore, Attreides' statements reflect the great houses' feeling of supremacy over the Fremen and how they justify their colonisation with the argument to protect and civilise them. However, the Fremen seem to be aware of the great houses' real aims of colonising their

planet, Kynes who serves as the judge of the change comments: “Arrakis could have been a paradise. The work had begun but then the spice was discovered, and suddenly no one wanted the desert to go away” (Villeneuve, 2021, 01:46:00).

3.2.2. The Portrayal of Paul Atreides as a Savior

Played by Timothée Chalamet, the character of Paul Atreides in the *Dune* film serves as a white saviour to the Fremen. This is reflected in his representation with superior abilities, adaptability to the Fremen culture and his possession of prophetic traits. First of all, Paul Atreides was born to a noble family. His father is Leto Atreides, the leader of House Atreides and his mother is Lady Jessica a member of the Bene Gesserit sisterhood. Apart from his noble blood, Paul Atreides is demonstrated with other abilities that set him superior. Thanks to the rigorous training he has taken, Paul is represented as a good warrior in terms of sword fighting and tactical warfare. His combat skills are exhibited in the scene when Paul fights Jamis, a respected Fremen warrior and kills him. Defeating Jamis, even though he is not used to the nature of this fight nor to the sword used or the costume he wears as this fight is one of the Fremen rituals, his victory against the Fremen warrior proves his superiority in combat skills and his capability to lead and protect the Fremen. Furthermore, Paul inherits other advanced and rare skills from the Bene Gesserits. Such as the Voice, a technique that allows him to make others obey his will.

Second, the character of Paul Atreides is an outsider of Arrakis and external towards the Fremen culture. However, unlike other outsiders, Paul has easily adapted to the planet and the culture as if he is a native-like. This is depicted in several scenes within the film. In one of the scenes, it is demonstrated that Paul is not anxious about the sun and the heat of Arrakis. Even though he is not a Fremen, he is depicted moving under the sun in times when other outsiders of his people stop the movement, in this scene he confronts a Fremen who is working in the yard, the man tells him: “You should not be out here in this hour of the day.” (Villeneuve, 2021,

00:43:50) Moreover, Paul's quick mastery of the Fremen skills like wearing the stillsuit correctly, his understanding of the harsh nature of the desert, and his ability to survive in the desert as an outsider show that he is uniquely suited and adapted to the Fremen culture and environment.

Finally, Paul Attreides is represented as the Fremen's Lissan Al-Gheib, "The Voice from the Outer World", a prophetic figure that is believed to be their saviour and to lead them to freedom and transform their harsh desert to a better place. The character of Paul is believed to be Lissan Al-Gheib. In the film, Paul possesses several prophetic traits. One of them is seeing the future through his dreams and visions, such as his dreams about Arrakis before he visits it. He sees Chani before he meets her, he sees Danken's death before it happens, and lastly, he prophesies the occurrence of a big war that consists of huge armies of Fremen warriors under his rule. Paul's superior abilities, adaptability to Arrakis and native culture, and his dreams and visions prove that he is Arrakis's saviour, Lissan Al-Gheib. However, the fact that Arrakis, the Fremen home, will be saved by a white outsider recalls the old Orientalist trope that has been discussed in the first chapter. This trope discusses the saving of The Orient Land by a Western character like in *Lawrence of Arabia*. Both Paul and Lawrence are white figures who come to the desert (Arab land), adapt to its life and rule its people who could not rule themselves and save them from oppression.

Figure 3.1: The First Coming of Paul Attreides to Arrakis (Villeneuve, 2021, 00:36:48)



Figure 3.2: Fremen Shouting “Lissan Al-Gheib” (Villeneuve, 2021, 00:36:38)



3.2.3. The Portrayal of the Fremen as Inferior

The Fremen are the indigenous people of Arrakis. Drawing attention to their language, religious beliefs, societal structure, and adaptation to a harsh desert environment, the Fremen are a parallel to Arabs, particularly the Bedouin tribe of the Arabian Peninsula. Even though the *Dune* film takes place in the far future, the Fremen are still depicted through an Orientalist lens as inferior. This is reflected in their portrayal as primitive, untrustful, and in need of a saviour.

To begin with, the Fremen in the film are desert-dwelling people who are still living a primitive life. In contrast with the great houses' highly advanced technology and modern way of life, Fremen's way of life remains very traditional. They still inhabit caves and wear desert robes and head coverings.

Figure 3.3 The Fremen People (Villeneuve, 2021, 00:36:20)



Figure 3.4: The Fremen Religious Rituals (Villeneuve, 2021, 00:43:06)



Figure 3.5: The Fremen Warrior (Villeneuve, 2021, 02:13:25)



In comparison to the highly developed weapons, giant spaceships, highly-speed ornithopters, and innovative shields that are used by the great houses, the Fremen are still using traditional weapons, mostly handmade. While each of the great houses possesses a huge army that is organized and trained on war tactics, the Fremen do not have any organised army or war plan which is why all their campaigns to free Arrakis failed. Second, from the Western point of view, it is demonstrated that the Fremen are received as mysterious and untrustworthy people. In the very first time when Attreides reached Arrakis, they were received by the Fremen people who were shouting “Lissan Al-Gheib” referring to Paul. In this scene, Thufir Hawat says to Paul: “Don’t be fooled by their love, they follow their old masters, attendance is mandatory” (Villeneuve, 2021, 00:36:54) which reflects that Fremen are untruthful, they may show their loyalty to protect their society and to hide their real intentions. Finally, set in a far-off future 20,000 years ahead, the Fremen are exhibited as oppressed people who are subjected to colonisation, abuse, and exploitation by the Harkonnens, in the very first scene Chani says:

They ravish our Land in front of our eyes, their cruelty to my people is all I've known. These outsiders, the Harkonnens, came long before I was born. By controlling spice production, they became obscenely rich. Richer than the emperor himself. (Villeneuve, 2021, 00:01:40)

The Fremen attempted several times to free their Arrakis, it is demonstrated that they have been in a continuous resistance state, yet the film shows that their efforts have not paid off because of their helpless state, underdeveloped technology, and unorganised army. This depiction of Fremen as helpless, vulnerable, and unable to defend their planet reflects an Orientalist trope that has been discussed in the first chapter. It portrays Arabs as primitive, irrational, inferior, and incapable of self-governance hence they need a Western mind to govern them, save them, and lead them to victory. This saviour in the *Dune* film is represented in Paul Attreides whose characteristics will unite the Fremen and provide them with power to defeat their enemy.

3.3. Setting

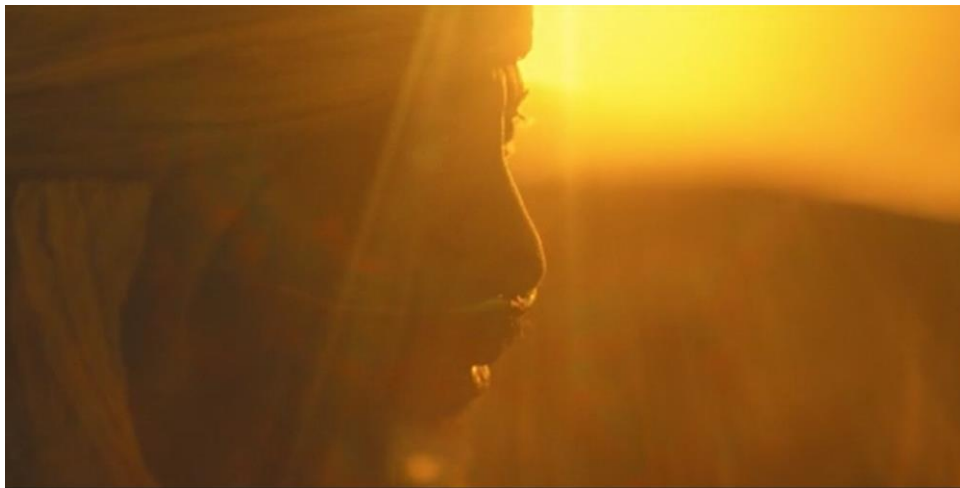
3.3.1. The Portrayal of Arrakis as Harsh and Hostile

The planet Arrakis, also known as Dune, is set as the centre setting in Villeneuve's film *Dune* (2021). Arrakis is the Fremen's planet and home, and it parallels the Middle Eastern desert. The depiction of Arrakis perpetuates the Orientalist portrayal of the East (Orient). Even though the film is supposed to be portrayed in a futuristic setting, Arrakis is still portrayed as a harsh, hot, and hostile desert. To begin with, like in other Western films such as *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and *The Sheik* (1921), the first representation of Arrakis showcases a vast Sahara Desert that endlessly stretches to the horizon. Using exceptionally high cinematographic techniques, Arrakis is captured as a barren land where there is little to no life. Moreover, the film's representation emphasises the intense heat of Arrakis. The sunlight often casts a harsh glare over the desert and makes the heat visible to the audience.

Figure 3.6: Arrakis Desert (Villeneuve, 2021, 01: 55: 25)



Figure 3.7: Sunlight in Arrakis (Villeneuve, 2021, 01:58:47)



Also, the non-Fremen characters are shown struggling because of the heat of the environment, there are some times of the day in which they stop movement and stay inside to protect themselves from the sun. In the scene when Attreides reaches Arrakis, Thufir Hawat tells them: “Let’s get you out of the sun, the heat can kill in this place.” (Villeneuve, 2021, 00:37:20) Also, the process of harvesting spice takes place at night to avoid the sun of the day. Furthermore, Arrakis is portrayed as a hostile and unwelcoming place, especially towards outsiders. This is exhibited in its harsh nature, high temperature, and scarcity of water. Apart from that, there are the sandworms, or Shai-Hulud, which are colossal creatures native to the desert planet Arrakis, they play a crucial role in the production of the spice, the most valuable substance in the

universe. These worms play a pivotal role in the representation of Arrakis as a formidable, unwelcoming place. Their immense size makes them a constant threat to anyone travelling through the desert. These creatures can detect and respond to rhythmic vibrations, which means that any movement in the desert can lead to a deadly attack by the giant sandworms. To the Fremen, the sandworms or Shai-Hulud are sacred and integral to their way of life, they have even developed a way of walking called "the sand walk" which is a technique to avoid the appearance of Shai-Hulud and survive when traversing the desert. However, to the outsiders, the sandworms represent another threat and layer of hostility. For this reason, the city where the outsiders are living is protected with the shield wall, which preserves it from the harsh weather and the worms. This portrayal of Arrakis as an unwelcoming place towards outsiders is another Orientalist trope that has been discussed in the first chapter, that is used to depict the Arab desert as welcoming and belonging to the Arab people only, with restricted access to foreigners unless granted permission by the Arabs.

3.4. Themes Where Techno-Orientalism Manifests

Even though Arabs were partially excluded from the discussion of techno-Orientalism, its concept is still showcased through the interaction of various themes. This following section discusses three elements that highlight the techno-Orientalist discussion in the film. To begin with the theme of Superstition and Mysticism will be investigated, exploring how the depiction of the Fremen's beliefs and customs reinforces orientalist stereotypes. Next the theme of Spice will be examined drawing comparisons between the exploitation of this resource on Arrakis and historical accounts of extraction. Finally, the Messianic theme will be analysed shedding light on the power dynamics and roles between the heroes and the native residents of Arrakis.

3.4.1. Spirituality & Mysticism

A recurring theme throughout the movie that endorses techno-Orientalism is spirituality and mysticism of the Fremen. Despite the futuristic and technologically advanced setting, the Fremen are depicted as superstitious beings who believe in prophecies (fed to them by the Bene Gesserit for centuries). The Fremen are shown as individuals deeply connected to the desert landscape of Arrakis holding faith in prophecies and mystical traditions. This is evident in their religiousness and Muslim-like traditions, where they are seen on multiple occasions praying, reading sacred manuscripts, and using prayer beads. It is also shown in their respect for the sandworms, Shai Hulud, and their anticipation of a prophesied saviour later embodied by Paul Atreides.

An example of this unfolds when the Fremen maid, Mapes, who Lady Jessica chooses as a housekeeper presents her with a crysknife, a knife that is in fact a Shai Hulud's tooth. The maid is emotionally disturbed as she proceeds to say: "When you have lived with prophecy for so long, the moment of revelation is a shock," outlining the importance of the prophecy and the Fremen's genuine belief in it. Another example is when House Atreides first arrived at Arrakis. When Paul and his mother boarded the ornithopter, his mother, looking down at the Fremen who attended to welcome the new rulers of Arrakis, proceeds to say: "These people have been waiting for centuries for Lisan Al Gheib (referring to her son), they see you they see the signs". Paul then responds: "they see what they have been told to see". This interaction goes to further show how House Atreides perceive the Fremen to be foolish and easily manipulated to believe propaganda that serves the great houses at their expense. A last example that is worth noting and which accentuates the Fremen's exoticism is when Stilgar enters Duke Leto's Hall and spits on the table in front of everyone as a sign of respect. Choosing such a disrespectful act to symbolize respect in the Fremen's culture confirms how they are depicted in a light that is characterised by savagery and inferiority.

Despite their adeptness at surviving in the desert and prowess in aspects like combat and survival skills as well as inventing and manipulating survival kits, the Fremen are depicted as holding onto superstitions. This juxtaposition of technology alongside mystical beliefs reflects elements of techno-orientalism. It portrays the Fremen as beings with an air of mysticism and superstition that contrasts with their technologically advanced reality.

3.4.2. The Spice

The Fremen are deeply connected to their Spice. They incorporate it into their routines and religious practices. Also, its emergence within the air results in their blue eyes which signifies their constant exposure to it. Despite their advanced desert survival techniques like using stillsuits for water conservation and mastering combat skills, the Fremen are often portrayed as primitive and secretive. The former trait is seen through their superstition and mysticism as mentioned above and the latter manifests in their secretive lifestyle where they live in scattered sieches across Arrakis' desert. Portraying the native Fremen in this light lays the grounds for justified Western Imperialism as such a precious resource would require higher oversight and regulation than that of the primitive Fremen.

Moreover, Spice is utilised in different manners depending on the user. This is stated early on in the film when Paul Atreides was studying about the Fremen:

For the Fremen, Spice is the secret hallucinogen which preserves life and brings enormous health benefits. For the Imperium, it is used by the navigators of space to find safe paths between the stars. Without spice, interstellar travel is impossible, making it by far the most valuable substance in the universe. (Villeneuve, 2021, 00:06:30)

This quote highlights techno-Orientalists belief as the Fremen would only use such a valuable resource for matters of superstition such as inducing hallucinations or altering their states of

consciousness, unlike the Imperium who utilises Spice for more significant and technologically advanced matters such as navigating and exploring the universe.

Drawing a comparison, the concept of spice in *Dune* mirrors the spice trade routes where European explorers embarked on dangerous journeys to the East to satisfy medieval tastes and imaginations (Futo & Nasehi, 2023). Just as these spices were luxuries and exclusive for the upper class, Spice in *Dune* serves as a coveted commodity for feudal nobles within the Imperium.

This dynamic also resonates with the exploitation of Middle Eastern oil extracted from nations like Iraq, whose name bears resemblance to Arrakis. Both regions consist of arid landscapes inhabited by groups such as the Bedouin enduring conditions akin to those faced by the Fremen.

Another point to be considered is how the Imperium' lack of concern for Arrakis' ecosystem once they found the spice mirrors the disregard for ecological and social consequences of resource exploitation seen in oil nations in the Middle East. In the film, Dr. Kynes abandoned ecological testing station represents a forgotten ideal of progress that was forsaken for unending resource exploitation.

3.4.3. A White Savior as The Messiah

In the film, Paul Atreides is depicted as the prophesied saviour of the Fremen. The Fremen, House Atreides, and the Bene Gesserit share this belief highlighting a mix of religion, colonialism and techno-orientalism.

As per Abrahamic religions a Messiah is a saviour or liberator sent by Divine forces to liberate a group of people and rescue them from suffering (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). In *Dune*, Paul embodies this role within a narrative of salvation. Despite the Fremen's adeptness at surviving in their desert surroundings and their advanced yet limited-to-their-own-environment technologies, they are portrayed as dependent on an outsider—specifically a white outsider—to

guide them towards prosperity. This portrayal echoes the theme of The White Savior throughout history suggesting that Western intervention is crucial for achieving even non-Western aspirations.

Paul's journey is greatly shaped by the manipulations of the Bene Gesserit, who have planted prophecies among the Fremen. Lady Jessica, his mother, firmly believes in his fate as the Kwisatz Haderach (meaning the shortening of the way), which affirms the notion that Paul's leadership is predetermined. The Fremen accepting Paul as their Lisan al Gaib (the Voice from Afar) further shows their belief in a saviour, confirming the narrative that indigenous communities rely on an outworlder's intervention for greatness.

Paul is portrayed as the Fremen's awaited hero in multiple scenes throughout the film. An example of that is when he first arrives on Arrakis, crowds of the Fremen gathered to greet him with a mixture of awe and reverence demonstrating their belief in the prophecies foretelling the coming of a stranger who will lead them. This initial interaction hints at Paul's role as their awaited leader. Another significant scene occurs when Shadout Mapes gives Lady Jessica a crysknife describing the moment as a "moment of revelation." This gesture symbolises the Fremen's acceptance of Paul's family, their rule, and their faith. This scenario illustrates the concept of techno-Orientalism. Despite the Fremen's technology and intimate knowledge of their surroundings, they are still portrayed as needing Paul's guidance to unlock their potential. This reflects perspectives on the Middle East, where Western powers often position themselves as drivers of progress, peace, and stability.

To sum up, *Dune* utilises Paul Atreides' messianic storyline to reinforce the white saviour archetype within a techno orientalist context. The Fremen, despite their resilience and technological creativity, are shown as dependent on an outsider to lead them, perpetuating orientalist stereotypes in a futuristic setting.

Conclusion

While *Dune* attempts to explore techno-Orientalism through its portrayal of the Fremen, it ultimately falls short in fully including Arabs in this discourse. The film presents the Fremen as possessing advanced survival skills and a deep connection to their environment, mirroring elements of techno-Orientalism. However, it consistently depicts them as inferior and technologically less advanced compared to the Western factions, perpetuating Orientalist stereotypes.

Techno-Orientalism, in theory, should portray Arabs, represented by the Fremen in *Dune*, as technologically advanced and innovative despite their cultural differences. Instead, the film reinforces the notion of Arab inferiority by depicting them as primitive and superstitious, overlooking their potential for technological prowess. This failure to present Arabs as equals in the discussion of techno-Orientalism reinforces existing power dynamics that position the West as inherently superior.

To address this shortcoming, *Dune* could have depicted the Fremen as more technologically adept, showcasing their ingenuity and resourcefulness in adapting to their environment. By portraying Arabs as equals in technological innovation, the film could have challenged Orientalist stereotypes and contributed to a more nuanced discussion of techno-Orientalism. Overall, *Dune* missed an opportunity to fully include Arabs in the conversation of techno-Orientalism and instead perpetuated outdated tropes of Arab inferiority and need of Western guidance.

General Conclusion

In summary, this research has aimed to investigate the blend of Orientalist and techno-Orientalist themes in the representation of Arabs in *Dune* played by the Fremen. Based on an intensive literature review of Orientalism, techno-Orientalism, the analysis uncovers layers of nuanced portrayal of Arabs showcasing how Orientalist ideologies are woven both bluntly and subtly into the film's storyline.

At the core of this exploration is the scrutiny of Orientalist motifs in how the Fremen, the inhabitants of Arrakis, are depicted. Similar to portrayals of Middle Eastern cultures through an Orientalist lens the Fremen are shown as exotic, primitive and reliant on help. This depiction reinforces stereotypes that paint them as inferior and in need of foreign influence for progress instead of portraying them as an active technological threat to the other houses. This nuanced portrayal exposes how Arabs are not quite involved in the techno-Orientalist narrative created by the West to identify the far East.

Furthermore, this study delves into the position of Arabs in the techno-Orientalist discourse, where the orientalist narrative takes place in futuristic settings, creating similar power dynamics and cultural representations of that that Orientalism creates. Through this perspective, the film portrays the Fremen as possessing survival skills and a strong bond with their environment while also showing them as reliant on Paul Atreides -an outsider- to guide them towards prosperity. This juxtaposition highlights how Orientalist narratives persist in settings where Western superiority is dominant over Eastern cultures. This dynamic excludes Arabs from the typical representation of Eastern peoples as a technologically threatening in the context of techno-Orientalism.

Moreover, the analysis focuses on how Arrakis is portrayed in *Dune* emphasising the unwelcoming nature of the desert planet through visually striking scenes and symbolic imagery. This depiction reinforces stereotypes of the Eastern landscape, as exotic and hostile to outsiders.

The 2021 film adaptation of *Dune* does not only delve into themes of power, identity and destiny, but also reflects broader discussions on East /West relations and how the power dynamics and cultural conceptions haven't really changed. While the film explores this relation, it perpetuates ideas of superiority and inferiority by adhering to Orientalist and techno-Orientalist frameworks.

This research emphasises the need to critically evaluate portrayals of Arabs and question the underlying ideologies that influence them. By challenging Orientalist narratives in films such as *Dune*, both filmmakers and viewers could opt for a more inclusive and critical cinematic landscape that challenges dominant power dynamics. In summary, *Dune* provides a platform for examining Orientalist and techno-Orientalist discourses prompting audiences to consider how culture, power and representation intersect in cinema.

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ملخص

تعود جذور التمثيل الغربي للشرق إلى الحركة الفنية للاستشراق، حيث استمر هذا التمثيل تاريخيا في تكريس الصورة النمطية و الانتقاص الثقافي، خصوصا عندما يتعلق الأمر بالعرب. إلا أن ظهور "الاستشراق التكنولوجي" أضفى طابعا جديدا و معاصرا للتصور الغربي للشرق الأقصى الذي أصبح يُصوّر على أنه متقدم تكنولوجيا و متخلف ثقافياً في نفس الوقت. و على الرغم من التقدم التكنولوجي أيضا في الدول العربية إلا أنه يتم تجاهله. تعالج هذه الدراسة التأثير المستمر للعدسة الاستشراقية في تشكيل صورة العرب حتى في البيئات المستقبلية كأفلام الخيال العلمي. يسلط هذا البحث الضوء على "كُنَيْب" و هو احد أفلام الخيال العلمي الغربي و الذي تدور أحداثه في كون بعيد يوازي الشرق الأوسط. يناقش هذا البحث العلاقة بين "الاستشراق التكنولوجي" و صورة العرب في المستقبل. من خلال مراجعة شاملة للمراجع السابقة و تحليل محتوى نوعي شامل للفيلم ، تظهر هذه الدراسة استمرارية المنظور الاستشراقي في تصوير العرب في فيلم كُنَيْب (2021) بالرغم من البيئة المستقبلية التي تدور فيها أحداث الفيلم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العرب، كُنَيْب، الاستشراق، الاستشراق التكنولوجي، أفلام الخيال العلمي.