

Decolonizing The Future: What Does Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965) Teach Us About Colonization? *Descolonizando O Futuro: O Que Duna (1965), De Frank Herbert, Nos Ensina Sobre A Colonização?*

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ABSTRACT:

This paper looks forward to analyzing the decolonization process in Frank Herbert's science fiction novel *Dune* ([1965] 2016), and as a central focus, the storyline that follows the protagonist Paul Atreides and the native population from the planet Arrakis, the Fremen. For this purpose, we used as a theoretical framework the first chapter from the book *Science Fiction, Imperialism and the Third World: Essays on Postcolonial Literature and Film* (2010), which is entitled *Postcolonial Science Fiction: The Desert Planet* (2010), by scholar Gerald Gaylard. Our analysis also incorporated key insights from Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* ([1961] 2005), a foundational text for understanding the decolonization process. Building upon the insightful analyses of Gaylard and Fanon, this paper explores a post-colonial literary perspective, departing from conventional examinations of colonizer-colonized dynamics. The concluding section offers a reflection on the implications of colonization and the potential for decolonization within both fictional narratives and the broader global context.

Keywords: Dune. Colonization. Decolonization. Postcolonialism. Science Fiction.

RESUMO:

Este artigo busca analisar o processo de descolonização no romance de ficção científica *Duna* ([1965] 2016), de Frank Herbert, e, como foco central, o enredo que acompanha o protagonista Paul Atreides e a população nativa do planeta Arrakis, os Fremen. Para tanto, utilizamos como referencial teórico o primeiro capítulo do livro *Science Fiction, Imperialism and the Third World: Essays on Postcolonial Literature and Film* (2010), intitulado *Postcolonial Science Fiction: The Desert Planet* (2010), do acadêmico Gerald Gaylard. Nossa análise também incorporou insights-chave de *The Wretched of the Earth* ([1961] 2005), de Frantz Fanon, um texto fundamental para a compreensão do processo de descolonização. Com base nas análises perspicazes de Gaylard e Fanon, este artigo explora uma perspectiva literária pós-colonial, partindo de análises convencionais da dinâmica colonizador-colonizado. A seção final oferece uma reflexão sobre as implicações da colonização e o potencial da descolonização tanto nas narrativas ficcionais quanto no contexto global mais amplo.

Palavras-chave: Duna. Colonização. Descolonização. Pós-Colonialismo. Ficção Científica.

1. INTRODUCTION

In late 2021, the world witnessed another British colony gaining its independence, achieving freedom while celebrating the birth of a new republic. Barbados, now a former Caribbean colony, celebrated its independence, even though the shadow of the United Kingdom remained, since it was still a member of the Commonwealth of Nations¹. For this reason, the effects of British colonization over this country remain on its independent ground. Nevertheless, Barbados now has a challenging but promising future without the restrictions of a fallen empire, even though the government may struggle with unsolved and omitted difficulties left by the British. And now, what do we call a world that still struggles with the effects of the barbaric and unforgiven colonizations from the great, allegedly fallen, empires?

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The politics and effects of colonization in today's world can be seen in several countries, such as Brazil, India, and China. Though each of them has been growing economically despite the previous repression from former empires, it could be interesting to change this perspective and imagine a new world. Frank Herbert's *Dune* ([1965] 2016) can change this common belief that reality is far more complex than fiction. Set 1 MCGREEVY, Nora. Barbados Breaks With Elizabeth II to Become the World's Newest Republic. United States of America: *Smithsonian Magazine*, 2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/barbados-elizabeth-british-empire-republic-180979147/>. Accessed on: January 10, 2025.

in a distant future, the novel presents a scenario where colonization left Earth and expanded over planets and galaxies. Although the story does not possess sentient alien life forms, the human race is divided into several planets, forming a new Empire later on, with an Emperor ruling over the galaxy and family houses ruling over planets. In the novel, we follow the protagonist Paul Atreides, son of Duke Leto Atreides, commander and ruler of Caladan. By imperial decree, the Atreides family is forced to move from its birth planet to a new one, a desert planet: Arrakis. This planet, also called Dune, is the source of one of the most precious products in the galaxy: spice. The Melange, the “[...] spice of spices, the crop for which Arrakis is the unique source” (Herbert, 2016, p. 666), is necessary for interplanetary voyages since any type of computer or artificial intelligence was gone long ago. And there, a place which was formerly controlled by the Harkonnens, an Atreides rival family, where our protagonist will begin his journey.

Analyzing the narrative, discernible parallels to contemporary realities emerge, prompting reflection on historical alternatives and shifts in societal perspectives regarding colonization and its impact on various populations. This context provides a framework for examining the novel’s representation of colonization and its associated consequences.

To further discuss this subject, we proceeded with qualitative research in which we would discuss this approach through the lens of a scholar. We started analyzing the works once displayed in the academic community that discussed such subjects and became aware of the first chapter of the book *Science Fiction, Imperialism and the Third World: Essays on Postcolonial Literature and Film* (2010), which is entitled *Postcolonial Science Fiction: The Desert Planet* (2010), written by scholar Gerald Gaylard. Also, we took several insights from Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* ([1961] 2005), a necessary book to comprehend the decolonization process. At this point, from the insightful analyses made by Gaylard and Fanon, we could learn more about the postcolonial effect on science fiction works, especially the one that is aimed at being the central subject of this paper, the novel *Dune*. Therefore, we proceed to analyze the essence of colonialism, postcolonialism, and decolonialism in the literary work mentioned above.

2 POSTCOLONIAL SCIENCE FICTION

Our organizational framework divides the subject matter into three key areas: the representation of colonialism within Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, allowing for investigation and discussion; postcolonialism, informed by analyses of postcolonial societies; and decolonization, as reflected in the novel. These topics will be explored through critical engagement with the author and literary work.

2.1 Colonialism

To initiate this discussion in which Frank Herbert’s *Dune* is the central topic, we must step back to unveil the meaning of colonialism. Gary Gaylard comprehends colonialism as a “[...] geographical dominion, though it may exist in other non-geographical forms, such as the economic hegemony often called neo-colonialism” (Gaylard, 2010, p. 22-23). However, we also add an anti-colonial view to this definition. In the book *The Wretched of the Earth* (2005), Frantz Fanon describes colonialism as an apparatus of violence and differentiates that “[...] colonialism is not a machine capable of thinking, a body endowed with reason. It is naked violence and only gives in when confronted with greater violence” (Fanon, 2005, p. 23). As once described, Arrakis is a planet that was first colonized by humans; however, since the discovery of the power conceived by the spices that could only be found there, the Empire began its subjugator’s politics over the des-

ert planet, giving the place to the Harkonnens, becoming a place to be traded in the market of the universe.

It is important to highlight that the first colonization of Arrakis by the human species was not similar to the second colonization that is portrayed in the novel. The desert planet was inhabitable by sentient life forms and was more of a settlement for its first colonizers. Only after the Empire and its autocratic form of government, which led to the exploration of the richness of each planet, was the melange found, and the oppression began. This imperialist point of view presented in the novel was not put there deliberately, nor was the choosing of a desert planet as the scenario for the main plot. The North American author did

[...] not only chose a desert landscape as a dramatic backdrop for his analysis of imperialism, but also a human culture of coexistence, scarcity and thrift in this landscape as an apocalyptic endpoint against which to contrast the excesses (often ecological) of imperialism (Gaylard, 2010, p. 25).

On this matter, Herbert was aware of human history, of the failures of the Empires of the Earth. Nevertheless, the allegories were not limited to the identification of imperialism and the damage that was caused all over the world. The Fremen, the native population from Arrakis, were based on real-world populations, such as the inhabitants of the Middle East; meanwhile “[...] the imperialism of the West in relation to the oil of the Middle East can be seen as an analogy for the desire for the spice in the text” (Gaylard, 2010, p. 25). In his novel, Herbert “[...] wanted to show via the allegory with contemporary American imperialism in the Middle East that imperialism is alive and well and hence establish a contextual relevance for his critique” (Gaylard, 2010, p. 25). As we follow this concept deeply in the novel, another aspect of colonization can be found even in what we could call - the good guys -, which is represented in our protagonist, Paul Atreides, and in his father, Duke Leto Atreides. The Duke does not want to replicate the *modus operandi* of the ruling left behind by the Harkonnens, as he says:

“To hold Arrakis,” the Duke said, “one is faced with decisions that may cost one his self-respect.” He pointed out the window to the Atreides green and black banner hanging limply from a staff at the edge of the landing field. “That honorable banner could come to mean many evil things” (Herbert, 2016, p. 133).

The Atreides being an honorable family is something that foreshadows the entire novel and it passed almost genetically, from father to son. However, Duke Leto is aware of the condition the Empire imposed on the planet, and for that, he can see the imperialistic way, as he states: “Power and fear, [...] the tools of statecraft” (Herbert, 2016, p. 133). And because of this awareness of the ruling over the planet, the Duke was

Determined not to replicate the cruel colonialism of the Harkonnens, Arrakis’s previous overlords, and to find support on the planet in the face of the threat of imperial conspiracies with the Harkonnens, Atreides attempts to rule benignly and win the support of the indigenous Fremen. (Gaylard, 2010, p. 33).

It is notable in the novel that the Atreides have “[...] the ability to switch perspectives, to see beyond his own interests and those of his people, to take the side of the natives” (Gaylard, 2010, p. 33); however, this continues to be a form of colonization. This could be interpreted as a more amicable method of control, yet it still constitutes a form of colonization, thereby initiating the postcolonial analysis of the narrative.

The Science Fiction (SF) novel genre allows for more in-depth analysis due to its freedom from real-world constraints and established rules, thereby facilitating the author’s creative process. *Dune* extrapolates this aspect by pushing our society into a deep future that can be seen as weird and unseemly but stays true to

the true nature of humankind. For this reason, “*Dune* appears to be a classic example of the first school of nationalist postcolonialism in SF” (Gaylard, 2010, p. 24). *Dune* is not the only work to deal with the postcolonial aspect in our society; other works of SF do the same, as

[...] postcolonialism and SF are highly relevant to each other, both in terms of postcolonialism providing a valuable historical and theoretical lens through which we see SF, and in terms of SF providing a futurological extrapolation that expands postcolonialism’s purview (Gaylard, 2010, p. 34).

To do this, we must comprehend the term postcolonialism, which Gaylard defines as “[...] the demise of colonialism and the period subsequent to that demise, but it also suggests the ongoing survival and heritage of colonialism, that the past is never entirely erased” (Gaylard, 2010, p. 23). We see throughout the novel that, despite the beginning with a colonization aspect, the repulsion over this colonization is one of the themes that Herbert approaches. As stated by Gaylard,

Herbert was aware of this problem and preempted it in the texts, and it is in this way that he moved beyond the simpler nationalist resistance version of postcolonialism and into a more complex and skeptical postcolonialism (Gaylard, 2010, p. 27).

The critical perspective essential during the development of a science fiction novel can illuminate the potential for naivete if we fail to recognize the lingering indicators of imperialistic subjugation within our societal structures. Nevertheless, Gaylard states that “[...] *Dune* is a fascinating science fiction version of the first form of nationalist postcolonialism and a novel of its time” (2010, p. 26); and we concur with this idea. Frank Herbert not only provides us with a version of postcolonialism, but he also discusses in the novel the signs of imperialist oppression and the effects that still result in falling democracies or tropical dictatorships, as the “[...] personal choice and freedom are as important as opposition to injustice” (Gaylard, 2010, p. 31-32). In addition to the postcolonial perspective we can perceive in the novel, Gaylard also shares another terminology that was only possible through Frank Herbert’s vision of ecology and politics; it is what he calls [...] eco-postcolonial: it is a vision of nature as “multiple, cross-linked events” which is not amenable to the totalizing singular analysis and scheming of imperialism. It is a vision of multiple others in constant motion, a vision not amenable to unifying totalization. (Gaylard, 2010, p. 34).

This comprehensive perspective facilitates an exploration of the novel’s postcolonial dimensions, as well as other thematic elements, fostering discussions that can inspire belief in a decolonized future.

2.3 Decolonialism

Regarding Decolonialism, a re-examination of Frantz Fanon’s perspective is essential, particularly his assertion that “Decolonization is the encounter between two congenitally antagonistic forces that in fact owe their singularity to the kind of reification secreted and nurtured by the colonial situation” (Fanon, 2005, p. 2). These forces can be translated into the Fremen, the colonized, and the Empire, the colonists. Here, we talk about the freedom and protagonism of society, similar to what happened in Frank Herbert’s *Dune*. As Gaylard

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says, the novel creates

[...] a work of messianic and apocalyptic anti-imperialism, with all of the potential for drama that that entails, that is self-reflexively critical of our desire and need for messianic apocalypticism (Gaylard, 2010, p. 32).

The dangers of imperialistic power over countries are shown to us as the colonization process that came from the novel’s Empire. Not only does Herbert conceive of a world that could free itself from the Empire, but he also describes later how that process made Arrakis powerful and the Fremen owners of their

lands, without the presence of the Empire or any other type of outsider. This decolonization is what we, as a society, could hope for the countries that can free themselves from old empires. However, it will not be a quick and harmless process, for Fanon already stated that

Decolonization never goes unnoticed, for it focuses on and fundamentally alters being, and transforms the spectator crushed to a nonessential state into a privileged actor, captured in a virtually grandiose fashion by the spotlight of History (Fanon, 2005, p. 2).

As depicted in the novel, the decolonization process was characterized by conflict. Gaylard suggests that Herbert's narrative presented a plausible conceptualization of decolonization:

Instead of winning such a troubled independence from Empire, the Fremen of Arrakis seize control of the imperial system by manipulating the Empire's constitutive dependencies on spice. Paul becomes Emperor by manipulating the Imperium's spice addiction, and Stillgar (the Fremen chief) becomes the planetary governor of Arrakis, putting the Fremen in control of their own planet and of the Imperium as a whole (Higgins, 2013, p. 238).

Arrakis will later on, in Frank Herbert's *Dune* sequel novels, be the protagonist to the galaxy, a power that was once from several different houses to control a planet in the hands of a people that revolutionized and gained the possibility to be more after the Empire no longer has power over them. The Fremen and their history of freedom will be remembered for generations, for that world does not wish anymore that other worlds continue to be subjugated by imperialistic control. Not only in this fictional world is this a plausible and fortuitous possibility.

FINAL REMARKS

In conclusion, Frank Herbert's *Dune* represents a complex literary achievement that has, since its initial release, significantly impacted and been the subject of extensive study across various academic disciplines, as evidenced by the preceding discussion. Therefore, we advocate for further exploration of this seminal work, given that the present analysis only scratches the surface of its multifaceted dimensions.

Societal evolution encompasses various facets beyond colonialism, postcolonialism, and decolonialism, which represent only one dimension of a nation's identity. However, this aspect can be significant when analyzing literary works, particularly science fiction novels and short stories, which currently receive limited attention in literary studies. This presents a potential avenue for exploring a broader range of perspectives.

The genuine embodiment of decolonization lies in a nation's and its populace's active participation in global affairs. Continued reliance on former imperial powers to dictate global policies negates true liberation. Therefore, achieving authentic decolonization necessitates greater national autonomy, ideally through a republican framework, and demands a societal transformation, a revolution, to reshape the postcolonial landscape.

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