

Liberating Women's Bodies

Feminist Philosophy and the Bene Gesserit of *Dune*

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Maybe Frank Herbert was too subtle in crafting the powerful and influential female characters in *Dune*, since some readers seem to overlook them. Women are everywhere in *Dune*, especially the members of the Bene Gesserit Sisterhood. From Princess Irulan and Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam, to Lady Margot and Lady Jessica, Bene Gesserit women's voices and choices play crucial roles in the book.

But *Dune* doesn't seem to be a work of science fiction that promises a future of gender equality. Although set in the far future, it resembles a past of feudal dukes, barons, and counts owing loyalty to an emperor, who bequeaths planetary fiefs and favors as he sees fit. In this medieval setting, the women of the Bene Gesserit don't hold the same roles or have the same responsibilities as men. Instead, they still hold traditional female roles: concubines, wives, advisors, and religious figures.

Jessica is Duke Leto Atreides's bound concubine who bears an heir, Paul, and uses her business training to serve as Leto's secretary. While Leto's busy engaging in strategic military planning on Arrakis, she is instructing their new servants how to set up their household. At a formal dinner banquet, she plays the gracious hostess, calling for more dishes and making small talk with their guests. Leto sits at the head of the table and is the person called away when a potential emergency arises. Among the Fremen, Jessica is not allowed to be her own champion when Jamis calls for a ritual fight. These and many other examples show that Jessica isn't given the same opportunities or made part of the same action as men.

Mohiam is the Padishah Emperor Shaddam IV's advisor and Truthsayer. She is trusted by him and provides crucial advice during his final confrontation with the Atreides family. But she is not a ruler; she must rely on her authority as a high-ranking Bene Gesserit and her ability to Truthsay. She may evoke fear, but she has to channel political influence through others, usually men.

The characters Margot and Irulan have more limited appearances, but also appear bound to follow the lead of the men in their lives. Margot travels with her spouse, Count Hasimir Fenring, who is the Emperor's friend and confidant. Irulan accompanies her father, the Emperor, to Arrakis and agrees without resistance to a marriage alliance with the Atreides family.

This does not mean the Bene Gesserit are sitting around letting men run the show, though. They maintain a silent partnership in the CHOAM corporation and have an agreement with the Emperor to keep a Bene Gesserit on the throne. Meanwhile, they have a nearly covert operation involving a genetic master plan, missionary work, and highly specialized training.

Given these factors, *Dune* appears to create an environment with separate gendered spheres in which men and women often have different responsibilities, activities, and skills. Women have their own thing going on, but they do it behind the scenes and don't occupy roles with overt authority. This is not a universe in which women and men are equal.

The Female Body: Friend Not Foe

If we look at what's happening with the female body, though, *Dune* promises more freedom for its women. The Bene Gesserit do not see their bodies as obstacles to their active and purposeful existence in the world. They reject the idea that women are inferior or less capable of doing things than men simply because they're female and can get pregnant. Instead, they embrace the fact that they can choose to birth children and control their genetic lineage. They see vast potential in the body that members of the Guild or Mentats have overlooked or neglected. The Bene Gesserit view the body as a valuable vehicle through which to perceive the world and achieve their aims. In other words, the body is a way for them to be active agents of their own lives rather than something that holds them back or weakens them. By striving toward a balanced relationship between mind and body, they uncover a possible future in which women creatively utilize their potential to make their mark on the world.

Philosophers can help us understand how the depiction of the Bene Gesserit can be considered a science fiction vision of feminism despite *Dune's* lack of gender equality. In her groundbreaking 1949 book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) takes a bold step by saying that girls don't just naturally take on the characteristics and stereotypes associated with femininity and womanhood. There is no inner "feminine essence" driving their behavior: "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman."¹ In Beauvoir's view, what happens is that girls are socialized early on to think of themselves as weaker and so gradually femininize themselves. They are told to be modest, charming, and graceful to be accepted by society. But though they are rewarded for restricting themselves and

becoming “proper” women, they are also often treated as less valuable than their male counterparts in society. Over time, gendered restrictions and limitations become normalized, so it appears that women are destined by a “feminine essence” to always have certain attitudes and behaviors.

In the world of *Dune*, the Bene Gesserit have recognized the importance of socialization and flipped it on its head. Under the pretense of preparing girls to be concubines or wives placed in noble houses, they have developed a comprehensive education program that emboldens girls with a wealth of knowledge. In a presumably all-female schooling environment, girls are expected to study and master a broad range of subjects. Jessica tells the Fremen housekeeper, the Shadout Mapes, that “Tongues are the Bene Gesserit’s first learning” and shows off her fluency in Chakobsa, an ancient hunting language.² At the dinner banquet, she recalls a Bene Gesserit teacher’s lesson on espionage and counter-espionage while she uncovers a Harkonnen spy. Far from being merely a beautiful concubine and hostess, Jessica is a highly trained woman who actively uses her skills to analyze those around her and determine their level of threat to herself and her family on Arrakis.

Yet socialization also includes how girls learn to view themselves in relation to their body. Beauvoir says that in many cases, girls do not receive training in athletics, are forbidden from fighting or climbing or other “dangerous” activities, and are persuaded to avoid pushing their limits.³ This can have severe, long-lasting effects on their beliefs and behaviors, for “To lose confidence in one’s body is to lose confidence in one’s self.”⁴ Beauvoir takes issue with these structures of sexism, suggesting that if girls were raised with the same expectations, freedom, studies, and activities as boys, they would grow up free from feelings of weakness, passivity, and inferiority. If girls and women did not experience their body as something to be ashamed of, or a handicap on their ability to do things, they could enjoy a more active and independent engagement with the world, just like men enjoy. They could see themselves as people who initiate, rather than people who passively sit on the sidelines. Beauvoir advocates for women to recognize themselves as fully capable human beings and explore the many possibilities that have historically been denied to them.

Understanding that an academic education is not comprehensive enough, the Bene Gesserit also focus attention on the body and its potential to empower girls and women. Rather than forbid intense physical activities, they encourage girls to perfect their skills in areas such as fighting. Jessica is more than capable of handling herself in sticky situations. We only get a couple sentences describing Jessica using her skill in a tussle with Stilgar, and it is over quickly: “A turn, a slash of her arm, a whirling of mingled robes, and she was against the rocks with the man helpless in front of her.”⁵ But Stilgar is in awe of her “weirding ability of battle” that requires no weapons, and this helps show us how amazing her skills are to “maste[r] an armed Fremen.”⁶ Her body is the only weapon she needs, having been

trained in the art of combat at her Bene Gesserit school. In fact, the Bene Gesserit are actually the standard of measurement for combat. In the Appendix in *Dune*, the definition of the Sardaukar, the Emperor's feared soldier-fanatics, states that "their cunning abilities at in-fighting were reputed to approach those of a Bene Gesserit adept."⁷ The Sardaukar only *approach* the skills of the Bene Gesserit! Although the Bene Gesserit certainly don't seek out a fight and aren't soldiers, their special combat skills give them the confidence and strength to move through a dangerous world as women.

Iris Marion Young (1949–2006) takes Beauvoir's rejection of a natural "feminine essence" a step further in "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality." Young looks closely at the female body and how its movements and limitations are conditioned by socialization. She's interested in how the female body orients itself toward its surroundings and why we might already find gender differences in body behavior and movement in children as young as five.

Why should there be such a thing as throwing like a girl, considered a derogatory accusation? If the human body is primarily used to accomplish tasks – whether those be throwing a ball, lifting a box, or walking to work – why do boys and men attempt these tasks with more ease and free motion than girls and women? Why are girls and women more likely to experience their bodies as a fragile impediment, instead of as a durable instrument that gets things done? For Young, responses might include lack of practice, lack of confidence, and a woman's perception of herself as being an object rather than an initiator. A woman sees things happening to her, instead of her making things happen. She worries about being treated as an object rather than as an equal human being. What is needed is for her to have complete trust in her body to do what she wishes, so she does not see her body as a burden that holds her back.

In the *Dune* universe, the Bene Gesserit give girls so much practice in honing their skills that it almost guarantees they will grow into supremely confident women who trust their bodies to follow through on any action they desire. When Jessica is confronted with potentially hostile Fremen – the Shadout Mapes and Stilgar – she secretly readies her body for battle through "the waiting whipsnap of her muscles."⁸ There is no sense that she views her body as something fragile or burdensome. She has full faith in her body to initiate action, thanks to her Bene Gesserit training.

Young argues that if women were not "physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified, they could see themselves as agents who could go out and master a world that belonged to them."⁹ There is one example of Jessica being inhibited that stands out as a clear contrast to how she normally operates. After being drugged by the traitor in the Atrides household, Jessica awakes to find her mind and body are sluggish and she has been bound and gagged. With both her and Paul thrown into an ornithopter to be dropped in the desert by the Harkonnen, she must wait

for her ungagged son to assist her in getting her gag removed before she can take control of the situation. In this case, she is restricted from immediately confronting the challenge ahead of her because the Harkonnen knew “what a deadly creature” she is and prepared accordingly.¹⁰ But at other times, when her body is not confined, Jessica does appear to be a woman who rises up to meet what life throws at her.

Liberated Women

The Bene Gesserit in *Dune* represent a fulfillment of the ideal of the liberated women Beauvoir and Young describe. They are a pseudo-religious organization that encourages its members to perceive and use their bodies differently than we might expect of women in a medieval, feudal age, or indeed by the standard of today’s societies. Sisters and Reverend Mothers measure themselves against Bene Gesserit standards, not male standards. In fact, looking at gender in *Dune* from this angle provides a richer and more comprehensive understanding of its women than examining gender roles in terms of equality.

If women were “given the opportunity to use their full bodily capacities in free and open engagement with the world” and encouraged “to develop specific bodily skills,” they could overcome some of the challenges in a sexist society and make their goals a reality.¹¹ They could avoid the hesitancy and timidity that can get in women’s way. The Bene Gesserit show this in action. The body is a core part of their toolkit, not an obstacle. And everything they do is geared toward a goal, whether small or large, immediate or far-reaching.

The Bene Gesserit have certainly developed specific bodily skills, and these extend beyond their more obvious fighting ability. They train in the art of minute perception, honing their eyes, ears, and other sensory organs to notice the smallest of details of their environment. Jessica frequently uses this ability to assess novel situations, the potential for danger, and the best course of action. During virtually every step of her and Paul’s journey on Arrakis, they are processing sensory information in subtle ways, using their training to navigate and survive in an often hostile environment. At the banquet, she is “following the conversation with Bene Gesserit intensity” and reading the body language of key political figures on Arrakis to determine whose loyalties lie where.¹² For instance, she determines that the banker is terrified of Dr. Liet-Kynes after hearing the fear in his voice and seeing it in his face, his breathing, and the pulsing of a vein at his temple. In an encounter with the Shadout Mapes, Jessica reads the “petit betrayals” in Mapes’s actions and appearance as Jessica reveals her knowledge of the Bene Gesserit-implanted legends while also preparing to defend herself against a possible attack.¹³ Her keen perceptive abilities serve her well, as she gains valuable political insights that help her survive and establish a secure foothold on the planet.

Another useful skill the Bene Gesserit master is that of the Voice. This mysterious ability involves a Bene Gesserit pitching her voice in a targeted way to control another person. It is essentially a voice of command that cannot be resisted without special training. Mohiam commands Paul to draw closer to her when she prepares to administer the test of the gom jabbar. She also commands him to stop turning his head to look at the needle at his neck. Paul knows she is using the Voice, but he isn't trained well enough to resist it or use it himself. Jessica uses the Voice to put Thufir Hawat in his place, literally, and show him a glimpse of her powerful ability to control virtually anyone she wishes. The Voice combines skills in perception and vocal regulation to turn the mouth and vocal cords into a vehicle for women to bend others to their will. It is a special ability that only Bene Gesserit women have until Jessica trains Paul to use it, and so it's not something uniquely feminine, but instead a skill that requires practice to acquire. The Voice empowers women with confidence, because they know they can get things done quickly and efficiently and protect themselves in dangerous situations if need be. It's a kind of shortcut to power, to be used sparingly.

A larger-scale version of the Voice is the Missionaria Protectiva, a long-term project involving Bene Gesserit women traveling to the far reaches of the Imperium to sow religious myths to ensure a safe reception if later necessary.¹⁴ Although we do not meet any missionaries, we can speculate that these women must be sufficiently trained in a number of skills to successfully establish themselves in remote places. They have to survive in body and spirit while also persuading the locals to believe the religious dogma they bring along. On Arrakis, they are so successful that the Fremen even adopt their terms, including Reverend Mother. Centuries later, all Jessica has to do is prove herself as a Bene Gesserit to begin to win the loyalty of a new people.

A Balance Between Mind and Body

One of the key ingredients of the Bene Gesserit's success is their emphasis on balance between the mind and the body. Unlike the Spacing Guild, which prioritizes mathematics, and Mentats, who prioritize logic, the Bene Gesserit embrace a more thorough understanding of their capabilities and talents. They escape the trap of *Cartesian mind-body dualism*, a philosophy that has filtered into culture to position women on the lesser side of artificial divisions: men/women, masculine/feminine, mind/body, logical/emotional, rational/irrational, and active/passive.

Cartesian dualism is named after René Descartes (1596–1650), the French philosopher and mathematician considered to be the father of modern philosophy. Descartes popularized the theory that the mind and body are different kinds of “stuff,” or metaphysical substances. This theory

was supposed to answer old and lingering questions about the relationship of the mental and the physical in human life: How do they influence each other? What is consciousness and how is it related to the brain and body? Descartes' famous "I think therefore I am" reflected his belief that thinking alone could be proof of the existence of a person. Descartes thus put a high value on the mind and its ability to think, and believed the body was a complex machine that mostly worked autonomously unless the human mind commanded it, through the power of the will, to behave in desired ways.

Dualism has cast a long shadow in Western philosophy, making human bodies out to be burdens entrapping the minds within. In particular, the female body has been treated as a nuisance, even by feminists. It's often been considered a physical limitation that keeps women wrapped up in menstrual cycles, pregnancies, and inactivity, leaving them unable to develop their minds.

As we've seen, the Bene Gesserit take a different view in their philosophy. They don't affirm the body in its natural state, since they distrust instinctive behavior. After all, they administer the gom jabbar test to determine whether a person is human, and those who fail to keep their hand in the pain box are killed by the poison needle. But the Bene Gesserit do value the body once it has been trained to work in harmony with the mind. This gives them more flexibility in the use of human capabilities than the members of the Spacing Guild or the Mentats, who neglect the potential of the body.

In fact, Herbert must look to Eastern philosophies – and their view of the whole human and its interdependency with the world – in developing the Bene Gesserit's beliefs and activities. This not only bolsters the complexity of the characterization of their order; it also makes us look at avenues of strength and power beyond what we might expect from conventional gender roles.

Supernormal Powers Through Discipline

Principles from Indian philosophy make up a central part of the Bene Gesserit's operations. Their training focuses on prana-bindu, a form of total nerve and muscle programming. The terms *prana* and *bindu* come from Sanskrit. There, *prāṇa* refers to vital breath or animating force, and *bindu* means either a particle or the expression of highest consciousness.¹⁵ As the breath of life, prana provides the "electricity" needed for the vitality of the body's organs.¹⁶ In yogic meditation, *prana* is viewed as the link or bridge between mind and body.¹⁷ It is also the feeling of harmony grasped when there is balance in internal and external influences on a person such as eating, exercise, and right thinking.¹⁸

Indian philosophy differs from Western thought in its view that the mind is part of the body instead of the two being separate kinds of "stuff,"

like in Cartesian dualism.¹⁹ It is believed that through disciplining the mind and body through asceticism and yoga, a person can reach a deep state of meditation and attain a higher plane of consciousness and supernatural powers of action and knowledge.²⁰ Yoga represents “a set of disciplines of behavior, body, and mind, in which a practitioner gains progressive control and mastery over their psychophysical makeup.”²¹

The Bene Gesserit’s training in prana-bindu has many similarities to yogic practice. Prana-bindu allows its members virtually complete control over their bodily functions, including control of their breathing to the point of hibernation. Jessica shows her supreme control of her breath when she puts herself into such a state after getting caught in a sandslide. She “compose[s] herself in bindu suspension to reduce her oxygen needs” and her heartbeat slows down until Paul can dig her out.²² Hers is completely normal behavior for those trained by the Bene Gesserit. It’s Paul who makes a fuss after the sandslide, not her, and she chides him for his panic and tells him to get practicing his prana-bindu lessons again.

Prana-bindu can also be used to control other people’s minds and bodies by implanting subconscious controls into them. Margot recognizes that the Sisterhood might want to control Feyd-Rautha Harkonnen at a future point, so she plans to “plant deep in his deepest self the necessary prana-bindu phrases to bend him.”²³ This is future-proofing – like the method of the Missionaria Protectiva – that ensures women can control a dangerous person if the need arises. Sure enough, in a critical scene at the end of the novel, Jessica suspects Feyd-Rautha has been implanted by prana-bindu phrases, letting Paul know of this advantage in case he needs it in his duel with the Harkonnen. Paul refuses to say the trigger word, but stating his refusal to do so in the heat of combat causes a slight hesitation, enabling him to kill Feyd-Rautha, who had been gaining the upper hand in the fight.

The Bene Gesserit highly value the kind of self-control gained through focused attention to the body. This links with yoga and its focus on the breath and internal awareness of the body and its relationship with the mind. Appreciating the body for its capabilities and being able to control its natural processes are part of the Bene Gesserit way of being. But Indian philosophy is not the only Eastern philosophy that supports their order.

Indirect Action Through the Way

Taoism also appears in the workings of the Bene Gesserit order. One clue to its influence is the name of the Bene Gesserit Way, similar in name to the Tao (“Way”) in Taoism. The Bene Gesserit also seek the Kwisatz Haderach (“Shortening of the Way”), referring to someone who can “bridge space and time” through special mental powers.²⁴ Women follow the Bene Gesserit Way through participating in the extensive training regimen we’ve already discussed.

As a philosophy, Taoism embraces balance, as shown through the symbolism of yin and yang. The Tao is a force flowing through the world that maintains balance in the cosmos. Following the Way means striving to live in harmony with nature, rather than fighting against the flow of life. Taoism urges us to simply accept things as they are instead of trying to control and dominate the natural order, a theme familiar in Western philosophy.

Taoism also contains the paradoxical idea of *wu-wei*, a strategy of non-action that actually allows the most effective action to happen. In other words, acting in harmony with one's surroundings and the natural flow of the universe leads to the right consequences. One example in the key text of Taoism, the *Tao-te-ching*, is a wheel. At a glance, the hub of the wheel appears as a passive center that does nothing. But actually, the hub is essential to the function of the rest of the wheel. There is also the example of water, which is "soft" and seems to have no effect on hard rocks or mountains as it finds paths of least resistance through valleys or down mountainsides. However, over time, water reshapes the hardest rocks and mountains by carving paths through them and shows itself to be a strong force.

Taoist-inspired philosophy emerges on two levels for the Bene Gesserit. First, the individual Bene Gesserit avoids challenging others outright. Sisters and Reverend Mothers prefer to work covertly to accomplish their goals. When Jessica and Paul stumble upon Stilgar's hunting party, she refrains from using the Voice on Stilgar though she senses danger. Instead, she gathers more information and appears to go along with Stilgar's reasoning. It's only when she realizes he's going to eliminate her that she engages in combat. Even then, she first tricks him by doing "a slumping, deceptive faint to the ground."²⁵ By going along with the flow of events, she places herself in a better position to demonstrate her skills and thus secures his admiration and promise of safety. Her initial appearance of passivity and naivete translates into a better outcome than direct confrontation.

Second, at a collective level, the Bene Gesserit have a long-term strategy to improve humanity without the need to occupy official ruling positions in the Imperium. In Mohiam's conversation with Paul after he survives the gom jabbar test, she explains that the Bene Gesserit want to prevent humans from falling into enslavement by thinking machines again, as happened before the Butlerian Jihad. One of their main ways of preventing this is their breeding program: they carefully select bloodlines with favorable genetic material and place women as concubines or wives within noble houses to bear children. Training the body in prana-bindu is key to running this type of breeding program since it gives them control of their pregnancies. The result is that the Bene Gesserit are set to produce the ultimate superhuman that they can take charge of.

All of this occurs under the noses of men. When Paul asks his mother if his father knew her plan to birth and train the long-awaited Kwisatz

Haderach, her response indicates Leto's ignorance. When Paul discloses the Bene Gesserit's breeding plans in front of the Emperor, Mohiam screams for him to be silenced, hissing, "You mustn't speak of these things!"²⁶ They have been patiently waiting for many generations, working with the flow of the universe rather than trying to abruptly alter it to their will. Although they end up losing control of Paul, he stands as an incredible product of their selective breeding and training in the Bene Gesserit Way.

What's interesting about the women of the Bene Gesserit in *Dune* is not necessarily the political or social roles they hold, though some of them are quite influential. It's their dedication to training and the incredible bodily and mental feats they display, albeit subtly. *Dune* may not give us gender equality, but it turns dualistic thinking on its head by uplifting the female body as an essential tool for women to take control of their own destiny. This science fiction story shows us women who are confident, goal-oriented, and tough as nails while also being concubines, wives, and mothers.

Notes

1. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2010), 330.
2. *Dune* (New York: Berkley, 1984), 53.
3. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 397.
4. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 399.
5. *Dune*, 281.
6. *Dune*, 282.
7. *Dune*, 528.
8. *Dune*, 277.
9. Iris Marion Young, "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality," *Human Studies* 3 (1980), 152.
10. *Dune*, 164.
11. Young, "Throwing Like a Girl," 152.
12. *Dune*, 136.
13. *Dune*, 53.
14. Timothy O'Reilly, *Frank Herbert* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1981), 47.
15. W.J. Johnson, "prāṇa," in *A Dictionary of Hinduism* (Oxford University Press, 2009); John Bowker, "bindu," in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (Oxford University Press, 2003).
16. Ernest Wood, *Yoga* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 177.
17. Sthaneshwar Timalsina, "Liberation and Immortality: Bhuṣuṇḍa's Yoga of Prāṇa in the Yogavāsiṣṭha," in Knut A. Jacobsen ed., *Yoga Powers: Extraordinary Capacities Attained Through Meditation and Concentration* (Boston: Brill, 2012), 305.
18. Leonard M. Scigaj, "Prana and the Presbyterian Fixation: Ecology and Technology in Frank Herbert's *Dune* Tetralogy," *Extrapolation* 24 (1983), 345.
19. Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad, *Indian Philosophy and the Consequences of Knowledge: Themes in Ethics, Metaphysics and Soteriology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 91.

20. Stuart Ray Sarbacker, "Power and Meaning in the Yogasūtra of Patañjali," in Knut A. Jacobsen ed., *Yoga Powers: Extraordinary Capacities Attained Through Meditation and Concentration* (Boston: Brill, 2012), 199.
21. Sarbacker, "Power and Meaning," 197.
22. *Dune*, 249.
23. *Dune*, 338–339.
24. *Dune*, 522.
25. *Dune*, 281.
26. *Dune*, 478.