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Conference Paper · May 2023

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.7937792

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A comparative analysis between The Mahdi from *Dune* (2021) and Imam Mahdī in the Twelver Shi'a tradition

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Abstract: The 2021 Hollywood film *Dune* captured audiences' attention worldwide with its beautiful cinematography and compelling storytelling. The film tells the story of a messianic figure, The Mahdī, who is to save the people of Arrakis from oppression. An increasing number of media content is being produced in the US that depicts or refers to the personality of Imam Mahdī. In this research, I analyse The Mahdi archetype found in the film *Dune* (2021) and compare key characteristics to the Islamic and historical personality of Imam Mahdī. The character of The Mahdi from *Dune* (2021) shares key plot and character traits with Imam Mahdī in the Shi'a narrative. However, the central question is whether The Mahdi from the film is a divinely appointed infallible and spiritual leader or a humanist and secular political leader.

Introduction

In the last several decades, American popular culture has produced several films presenting the concept of a saviour figure through big-budget Hollywood films, television series, and literature. The saviour figures in Hollywood films have many characteristics similar to the Jesus Christ archetype in Christian theology. However, the saviour figure has incorporated many characteristics of Imam Mahdī in recent years. Imam Mahdī is the Islamic saviour who is a descendant of Prophet Muḥammad and is in major occultation. He lives in the world; however, a veil separates the public from him. Numerous hadiths in Shi'a and Sunni literature prophesise the appearance of Imam Mahdī towards the end times, when

Imam Mahdī and his government will spread justice worldwide.

For my comparative analysis, I focus on the Imam Mahdī narrative from the Shi‘a tradition. The Mahdi archetype presented in American popular culture has many similarities and differences with Imam Mahdī presented in Shi‘a literature. The immensely influential science fiction book *Dune*, written by Frank Herbert in 1965, bases the story around the messianic protagonist of The Mahdi. Some of the films that mention a personality named The Mahdi or depict a character in their plot that has many shared traits with Imam Mahdī include *Dune* (1984), *Matrix* (1999), and *Dune* (2021). The Netflix TV series *Messiah* (2020) also depicts a character referred to as The Mahdi and demonstrates similarities with Imam Mahdī. While celebrating the Muslim festival of ‘Eid al-Fiṭr in The White House, President Joe Biden stated, ‘[I]f you come to my home, in my library you’ll see a lot of contemporary theology and comparative theology. And I’m just — been interested in it my whole career. And I realised how little I knew about the details of Islam. I knew — I knew about it, but I didn’t know the difference that existed. I didn’t know what the hidden Imam [was]’ (Biden 2022). This statement was significant because it brought the concept of Imam Mahdī into US political discourse. The President of the US was actively learning about Imam Mahdī and willingly shared this information with the public. His choice of words also hints towards the specific view of Imam Mahdī from the Shi‘a perspective, as the Twelver Shi‘a believe that Imam Mahdī is the twelfth divinely appointed leader who is currently alive and has been in occultation and hidden from the public for over twelve centuries. The majority of Sunni theologians consider that Imam Mahdī will one day openly declare his mission; however, it is unknown when he will be born and when he will show himself to the Muslims. All of the above demonstrates the growing significance of Imam Mahdī in Western media and political discourse and demands that the discourse is analysed critically.

Methodology

The film *Dune* (2021) is based on the successful science fiction novel of the same name *Dune* written in 1965 by US author Frank Herbert. The filmmakers attempted to keep the film's plot and characters close to the novel. For my research, I focus on the film. David Lynch directed the first film adaptation of *Dune* (1984); however, it was unsuccessful enough to regain its budget cost, making it a box office failure (Balkovich 2021). This research compares the most recent big-budget Hollywood depiction of The Mahdi from *Dune* (2021), directed by Denis Villeneuve, against Imam Mahdī from Twelver Shi'a hadith and historical data. Comparative analysis is conducted to determine which characteristics of the Shi'a Imam Mahdī are depicted in the film. Moreover, does Denis Villeneuve present a secular humanist interpretation of Imam Mahdī and avoid the most important aspects of his persona as a divinely appointed position?

Comparison of The Mahdi and Imam Mahdī

To compare the story of Imam Mahdī with the Shi'a narrative and The Mahdi from *Dune* (2021) narrative, we need to establish some vital context from the film. Emperor Shaddam rules the universe and uses coercion and oppression to control this empire. The authorities mine for a rare and essential spice named Melange on the desert planet Arrakis. This spice enables interstellar travel across the universe. It is a crucial element to control and provides great wealth and power to whichever family mines the spice. The spice Melange is similar to the concept of oil, which is crucial for the travel and transport of goods and people across a long distance.

In *Dune* (2021), the saviour comes from outside Arrakis to save the Fremen, the natives of the planet Arrakis. The Arrakis landscape is similar to West Asia and North Africa, covered with scorching and dry deserts. The majority of the desert scenes were filmed on location in Jordan and the UAE to provide the film with an authentic look. Villeneuve explains that the original novel

The Mahdi from *Dune* (2021) and Imam Mahdī

tackled two important topics ‘the blend of the very dangerous cocktail that is religion and politics’ (Jones 2021). However, in his adaptation of the novel to film, I argue that Villeneuve and his screenwriter team have dramatically reduced the religious aspect of the story in the film.

The Mahdi from *Dune*

The film introduces the protagonist, Paul Atrides, who eventually becomes The Mahdi. There are many similarities and differences between his character and the personality of Imam Mahdī found in the Shi‘a narrative. Here I analyse the differences between Paul Atrides and Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan al-‘Askarī, or Imam Mahdī. Paul was born on planet Caladan, which is ruled by his father, Duke Leto, and Paul’s birth is open knowledge and not kept a secret. Paul has a public profile and accompanies his father in important meetings watching him lead his people. Paul is educated and trained by his mother, Lady Jessica, to develop super-human powers and abilities. As the plot progresses with various intrigues, Duke Leto is dispatched to planet Arrakis, where House Harkonnen murders him on the orders of Emperor Shaddam; all this happening when Paul is around 15 years old. Paul and Lady Jessica manage to escape from the House Harkonnen soldiers. In the desert, they meet the Fremen and join their group, whereby Paul fights a Fremen in a duel and kills him. Throughout the unfolding plot and character development, neither Paul nor his family demonstrates religious devotion to God or a monotheistic religion.

Imam Mahdī in the Shi‘a narrative

These are relevant details for my comparative study about the historical figure Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan al-‘Askarī or his more commonly used title Imam Mahdī. These details are from the Twelver Shi‘a hadith narrative. In 255 Hijri or 868 CE, Imam Mahdī was born in Samarra, north of Baghdad (Pishvai 2019: p.93). At the time, this city was the capital of the Abbasid Empire,

and the caliph resided there. Imam Mahdī's birth was kept secret due to the threat of death by Abbasid caliphs. Imam Mahdī's father, Imam Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī, was under house arrest, and all movements to the house of Imam al-ʿAskarī were under strict state surveillance (Pishvai 2019: p. 95). Thus, the birth and childhood of Imam Mahdī were kept hidden from the state authorities, the public, and most of the companions of Imam al-ʿAskarī, except for a few very close companions who knew of Imam Mahdī (Al-Qurashi 2007a: pp. 191–192). In 874 CE, Imam Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī was martyred on the orders of caliph al-Muʿtamid. It was while performing the funeral prayers of his father that at the age of five, Imam Mahdī appeared in a limited public gathering to lead the funeral prayer for his father (Pishvai 2019: p. 88). Imam Mahdī apparently disappeared into his father's house and entered the minor occultation (Al-Qurashi 2007b: p. 83), which lasted several decades, followed by the major occultation, which lasts until the present day.

Similarities: Imam Mahdī and The Mahdi

Here I analyse the similarities between Imam Mahdī from the Shiʿa narrative and Paul Atreides, who becomes The Mahdi from the *Dune* (2021) film. In the film, Paul is from a noble and respected House, Atreides, and his father, Duke Leto, rules over the planet of Caladan. Imam Mahdī's lineage descends from the tribe celebrated as the noblest of all Arab tribes, the tribe of Banū Hāshim, the same tribe Prophet Muḥammad was head of and later, Imam al-ʿAskarī became head of. However, the Banū Hāshim did not have any political roles or authority. In *Dune* (2021), Duke Leto Atreides is considered honourable and respected by other noble families across the galaxy. This affection and respect from other noble houses towards House Atreides makes Emperor Shaddam feel uncomfortable and threatened. Imam al-ʿAskarī was loved and respected as the leader of Banū Hāshim, the direct descendant of Prophet Muḥammad, one of the infallible Shiʿa Imams, and as a fountain of knowledge for

other Muslims (Al-Qurashi 2007a: p. 15). The popularity, respect, and affection that Imam al-‘Askarī received from the Muslims drove caliph al-Mu‘tamid to order the assassination of Imam al-‘Askarī. In both cases, Duke Leto was poisoned on the orders of the emperor, and Imam al-‘Askarī was poisoned at the age of 28 on the orders of the caliph. Before becoming The Mahdi, Paul Atreides, along with his mother, Lady Jessica, is kidnapped and taken to be executed by House Harkonnen soldiers. However, Paul and his mother fight their way out and escape. After Imam Mahdī performs the funeral prayers for his father, he enters a state of minor occultation. Through special training by his mother and the consumption of the supernatural Spice Melange on the planet Arrakis, Paul Atreides escapes assassination and lives to become The Mahdi. This is where the film ends, and the second part of his role as The Mahdi will be depicted in the second film to be produced in the next year or so. Imam Mahdī escapes, lives, and enters minor occultation whereby he only communicates through four designated representatives to the Shi‘a followers and those who seek his knowledge and ask him religious questions. Both Paul Atreides/The Mahdi and Imam Mahdī are given access to unseen knowledge of events in other parts of the world and the possible future. The Mahdi in *Dune* (2021) is even referred to as ‘Lisan al Ghaib’, the Arabic translation of which means ‘the tongue of the unseen’. Director Denis Villeneuve explains how he views Paul Atreides’s ability to utilise unseen knowledge, ‘Paul can foresee a future that is shifting all the time. He can feel things, he has emotion toward what’s coming. But intellectually, it’s very difficult to articulate’ (Travis 2021).

Differences: Imam Mahdī and The Mahdi

Dune’s (2021) representation of The Mahdi character has several significant differences from the Imam Mahdī personality presented in the Shi‘a narrative. In the film, The Mahdi’s mother, Lady Jessica, is a concubine of Duke Leto and not his official wife; thus, she is not a Duchess. In the case of Imam Mahdī,

there are various accounts of where his mother was originally from, either from Africa or Rome (Al-Qurashi 2007b: p. 32). Imam Mahdī's mother is referred to by various names; however, for this article, I will use the name Narjis (Al-Qurashi 2007b: p. 32). Narjis was not a concubine like Lady Jessica; however, she is referred to as having been purchased by the servant of Imam Mahdī's grandfather (Al-Majlisi 2012: p. 27). Narjis is narrated to have had dreams of meeting Imam 'Alī al-Naqī and willingly agreed to join his family in service and marriage to Imam Mahdī's father (Al-Majlisi, 2012, p. 30).

In the narrative of *Dune* (2021), Lady Jessica belongs to the Bene Gesserit Order, which wields considerable influence over the noble houses. They are a secretive order of women that have attempted to bring about The Mahdi through a selective and well-planned breeding program for thousands of years. Lady Jessica was supposed to have conceived a girl. However, instead, she manipulated her child to be male. Narjis was never part of any particular religious order. According to some narrations, she descended from a noble Roman lineage as well as a companion of Jesus Christ. She was drawn to Imam Mahdī's family through dreams that encouraged her to seek out and join Imam al-'Askarī's family.

In *Dune* (2021), Duke Leto is betrayed and poisoned by his trusted family physician Dr Yueh. Dr Yueh poisons Duke Leto to save his wife and child. However, Baron Vladimir of the House Harkonnen, a long-time rival and enemy of Duke Leto's family, murders Dr Yueh after his betrayal. Baron Vladimir assassinates Duke Leto with the full knowledge of Emperor Shaddam, leaving no doubt that this was a coup against House Atreides supported by the Emperor, who feared Duke Leto; the poison kills Duke Leto the same day. In Imam Mahdī's narrative, Imam al-'Askarī is poisoned on the order of Caliph Mu'tamid, and the poison takes several days to kill Imam al-'Askarī (Pishvai, 2019, pp. 84–86). It is unclear who provided the poison to Imam al-'Askarī – if it was someone close to him or was given through other means.

Two differences between The Mahdi from *Dune* (2021) and

Imam Mahdī from the Shi‘a narrative are significant because they relate to the core archetypal character of these messianic figures. The Mahdi of *Dune* (2021) is an unsure and scared young boy who is forced to accept his complex and challenging situation and grow into a more assertive individual. When training to become a skilled warrior, he doubts he will ever need the skills to fight. He has violent and unsettling visions and dreams of possible future events that weigh down his mind. When he escapes the Harkonnen soldiers and realises how close he came to dying, he panics and expresses his fear and uncertainty through anger towards his mother, almost blaming her for putting him into this situation. In the case of the Shi‘a narrative, Imam Mahdī is never depicted as being unsure of his important and difficult role of being an infallible Imam, even when his life is in constant danger by the threat of death. Imam Mahdī demonstrates confidence even at age five when he replaces his uncle Ja‘far from performing the funeral prayers for his father (Pishvai 2019: p. 88).

The divinely appointed position is the most significant difference between The Mahdi of *Dune* (2021) and Imam Mahdī from the Twelver Shi‘a narrative. The Mahdi is brought about through thousands of years of careful marriage selection, bloodline manipulation, and a generational breeding program of children from different noble houses across the known universe by the secret order of the Bene Gesserit. It is they who have managed and prepared this coming of this messianic figure. The Mahdi also develops more powers and abilities once he arrives on Arrakis and consumes the natural but highly rare powerful Spice Melange, which increases his physical and psychic powers. The Mahdi accesses visions of the past, the present and possible futures, and he becomes a faster and stronger warrior, demonstrated in his duel to the death against a Fremen warrior. On the other hand Imam Mahdī from the Shi‘a narrative is divinely appointed by Allah. Imam Mahdī’s lineage, being a direct descendent of Prophet Muḥammad, is essential, along with Imam Mahdī being from the eleventh generation separating him from his noble grandfather, the Messenger of Allah. In the case of *Dune* (2021), neither the

Emperor, Bene Gesserit, nor others know which generation or House The Mahdi will be born into. However, in Islamic history, Prophet Muḥammad had been known to have provided an accepted hadith that there would be twelve righteous leaders after him, the twelfth would be the final leader, and he would bring justice to the world. The Sunni school believed those leaders referred to were caliphs, and the Shi'a school believed that the twelve leaders were the divinely appointed infallible Imams, of which Imam Mahdī is the final one (Muhammadi Rayshahri 2009: p. 59). Allah appointed his position, giving the Imam complete authority on Earth like his previous forefathers. Unlike other religious leaders like the *marji'yyah* or political leaders like presidents, kings, or prime ministers, Imam Mahdī's authority derives not from the people or a secret order like the Bene Gesserit in planning his birth. Imam Mahdī's authority is preordained and appointed by Allah. There can be no discussion or challenge to his authority by the public. The Quran states in 4:59 that those who oppose him have opposed God and the authority of Allah, 'O you who believe! Obey God and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you' (Nasr et al., 2015: p. 219).

Conclusion

We can draw several significant conclusions about how the big-budget Hollywood film *Dune* (2021) manages to secularise a divinely appointed role and remove the monotheistic religious context from the characteristics of that messianic leader. The main character and plot of *Dune* (2021) depend heavily on the Shi'a narrative of Imam Mahdī and his life. As discussed, this heavy dependence on, almost imitation of, Imam Mahdī and his noble family, the importance of his father and the reason and method by which the ruler kills his father directly reflect the Twelver Shi'a narrative of Imam Mahdī, his father, and how and why the caliph Mu'tamid killed Imam al-'Askarī. Many of the essential characteristics of Imam Mahdī are taken and directly applied to the story of *Dune* (2021). The hot desert of Arrakis is an exact

location replica of the hot deserts of Arabia and Iraq. The various planets in *Dune* (2021) represent the major cities like Baghdad, Cairo, and Damascus, which were powerful centres of commerce, education and the military of their time. In *Dune* (2021), The Mahdī's ability to access powers and knowledge from the unseen world directly imitate the Shi'a narrative that the Imam has access to unseen power and knowledge. However, the most apparent and significant imitation is the use of the name, The Mahdī, and the Shi'a narratives of Imam Mahdī unquestionably and directly influence the role of a messianic saviour figure, The Mahdi.

Along with important crucial points that the film has imitated, there are significant points that hugely differ from the Shi'a narrative of Imam Mahdī. The uncertainty that Paul Atreides feels in his role, ability, and responsibility with which he encounters differs from the unwavering certainty that Imam Mahdī demonstrates. The changing arc and transformation of character in *Dune* (2021) is a powerful narrative tool to draw in the audience and include them on the journey of the hero's metamorphosis. The director, Denis Villeneuve, heavily relied on the *Dune* (1965) novel and claimed it was his bible in the production of the film: "[F]rom the beginning, I said to the crew, to the studio, to the actors: "The bible is the book. We will, as much as possible, stay as close as possible to the book"" (Westenfeld 2021). Even though the film was based on and heavily influenced by the book, the director and production company have made significant creative decisions to exclude or alter parts of the story and characters. Liet Kynes, the Judge of the Change, is a male character in the book; however, in the film, the gender has been swapped to female, and how the character dies differs between the book and the film (Voutiritsas 2021).

Many characteristics have been changed. For example, Paul's uncertainty about himself, the profane view of his transformation into The Mahdī, and the removal of God and religion from the equation. The secular humanist story of *Dune* captured the director's vision for the film adaptation, 'the way Frank Herbert used ecology, as a device to create that whole story on the background

of this story being the ecology and the fantastic ecosystem that he developed through the book, really mesmerised me as a kid' (Jacobsen 2022). *Dune* (2021) was part one of a two-part film series. The director explains that the book could not be adapted to just one film; thus, his intention for *Dune* (2021) was to produce a sequel that would complete the story and adaptation of the book. The film ends at the point where Paul Atreides and his mother have escaped their enemy, and they have met the Fremen and befriended them. In the sequel to this film, Paul grows more confidently into the saviour role of The Mahdi. In the Shi'a narrative, Imam Mahdī enters the minor occultation at five after his father is poisoned. He appears sixty-nine years later and then enters the major occultation period, which lasts until now. When the major occultation began in 941 CE, any other discussion about future events of the final appearance of Imam Mahdī in the Shi'a narrative fell into the category of prophecy and speculation.

The significant impact of *Dune* (2021) on the general non-Muslim public has been twofold. Firstly, the film's audience is introduced to a saviour messianic figure named The Mahdi. Non-Muslim audiences would otherwise have had the minimum potential to be introduced to this Islamically inspired character, as most non-Muslims are only familiar with the Jesus Christ messianic archetype or other characters who are derivatives of the Jesus Christ archetype. The film has brought the personality and story of The Mahdi figure to a larger audience in a highly entertaining and emotionally engaging method. Secondly, there is a flip side to the *Dune* (2021) representation of Imam Mahdī. The character depicted is an unsure and immature character who initially finds the role of a messianic saviour as a challenging and unwelcome burden. The film also depicts the role of The Mahdī as a pre-planned scheme concocted by a secretive, dangerous female-only order working over thousands of years to achieve the task of breeding The Mahdi. The film thus removes the most important aspect of Imam Mahdī's archetype, which is his divinely appointed role, selected by Allah to bring order and justice to a corrupt and disorderly world. The sacred divinely directed plans

manifesting themselves over thousands of years from the creation of Adam until the appearance of Imam Mahdī have been replaced by the plans and the scheming of a religious order that does not subscribe to any monotheistic religion. Thus, the viewers' understanding and point of reference for the historical Imam Mahdī maybe be influenced by the film's story and characterisation and how they view the Islamic personality of Imam Mahdī.

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