

Colonial Entanglements and Ecological Power: Spice Commodification in Dune Movie (2021)

Yusrina Dinar Prihatika^{1,*}

Universitas Ahmad Dahlan¹

*Corresponding author. Email: yusrina@enlitera.uad.ac.id

Submitted: 23 June 2024

Revised: 5 August 2024

Accepted: 14 August 2024

Abstract. *This study examines the themes of colonial entanglement and ecological power in the movie Dune (2021), focusing on the commodification of the spice “melange” on Arrakis. Using postcolonial ecocriticism and cultural studies frameworks, it explores how the movie portrays environmental exploitation and the marginalization of the indigenous Fremen. The study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach, utilizing content analysis as its methodology, reveals how colonial powers, like House Harkonnen and House Atreides, dehumanize and oppress the Fremen, ignoring their ecological knowledge and cultural significance. By drawing parallels to real-world colonial histories, the study highlights the film's critique of environmental degradation and cultural marginalization. It underscores the importance of recognizing indigenous knowledge and rights for sustainable and equitable resource management. This interdisciplinary approach provides insights into the ongoing relevance of colonial power dynamics and resource commodification in contemporary society.*

Keywords: *Dune movie; ecocriticism; colonialism; exploitation; cultural marginalization*

Abstrak. *Penelitian ini mengkaji tema keterjeratan kolonial dan kekuatan ekologis dalam movie Dune (2021), dengan fokus pada komodifikasi rempah “melange” di Planet Arrakis. Menggunakan kerangka ekokritik poskolonial dan studi budaya, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana movie menggambarkan eksploitasi lingkungan dan marginalisasi penduduk asli Fremen. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan metodologi analisis isi, Analisis mengungkap bagaimana kekuatan kolonial, seperti House Harkonnen dan House Atreides, mendehumanisasi dan menindas Fremen, mengabaikan pengetahuan ekologis dan signifikansi budaya mereka. Dengan menarik paralel ke sejarah kolonial dunia nyata, penelitian ini menyoroti kritik movie terhadap degradasi lingkungan dan marginalisasi budaya. Penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya pengakuan terhadap pengetahuan dan hak-hak masyarakat adat untuk pengelolaan sumber daya yang berkelanjutan dan adil. Pendekatan interdisipliner ini memberikan wawasan tentang relevansi berkelanjutan dinamika kekuatan kolonial dan komodifikasi sumber daya dalam masyarakat kontemporer.*

Kata Kunci: *Film Dune; ekokritik; kolonialisme; eksploitasi; marginalisasi budaya*

Introduction

Media with widespread appeal and easy accessibility are often referred to as popular culture. British media expert John Storey described popular culture in his textbook “Cultural Theory and Popular Culture” (Storey, 2024) as culture that is widely loved or enjoyed by many people and does not have a negative impact. Storey also mentioned that pop culture is authentic, being produced by society, rather than being commercial, provided by companies. He likened pop culture to folk culture, something that originates from society rather than being imposed on it. One prominent example of popular culture

in high demand today is films or movies. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, in their textbook “Movie Art: An Introduction” (2001), describe movie as a blend of various artistic and technical elements that work together to create meaning and elicit responses from the audience.

This research reflects the integration of two crucial aspects in its analysis: colonial entanglement and ecological power in the context of spice commodification in the movie *Dune*. The background of this journal is substantially driven by the relevance of its topic in understanding the dynamics of political, economic, and ecological forces that influence the narratives of colonialism and the commodification of natural resources.

The movie *Dune*, an adaptation of Frank Herbert's classic novel, presents a fictional world rich in political and ecological complexities (Kennedy, 2021). At the heart of its plot lies a substance that is highly valuable and economically significant, known as “spice.” In the film, “spice” is not merely a natural resource but also serves as a key to political power and control over the ecology of the planet Arrakis. The study of how “spice” is represented, commodified, and manipulated in the movie *Dune* becomes highly relevant as it provides profound insights into how ecological and colonial powers are intertwined and how the commodification of natural resources can become a tool of political domination.

The analysis of colonial entanglement and ecological power in the movie *Dune* can also be applied to real-world contexts. At many points in history, colonialism has been marked by the exploitation of natural resources, where commodities such as spices, grains, and minerals become the primary objects of colonization and power surrender (Syarif Rachmaji, 2022). By examining how the movie *Dune* portrays these dynamics, this research provides a deeper understanding of how the exploitation of natural resources in the context of colonialism remains relevant to this day.

Studies by Abbas (2023) explained his research on Abdul Razak Gurnah’s *Afterlives* through postcolonial ecocriticism, using qualitative methods to uncover the links between historical conflicts, colonialism, and their ecological impacts depicted in the novel. The study highlights the ecological and human costs of imperialism, emphasizing the enduring effects of colonial interventions on ecosystems and human lives. By exploring devastated human backgrounds, exploited resources, and disrupted communities, the analysis illustrates the interconnectedness of colonial power dynamics, identity struggles, and environmental degradation. The novel encourages readers to engage critically with the complex intersections of war, colonialism, and environmental justice.

Raymond Williams (1958) emphasized the importance of cultural analysis for understanding contemporary society and politics. His pivotal contribution to Cultural Studies and media studies came in 1958 with the publication of “Culture and Society 1780-1950.” In this influential book, Williams explores the connections between culture, society, and politics, introducing key concepts like the “culture industry” and “ideology.” This work laid the foundation for Cultural Studies and modern media studies. It underscores how artistic works, such as films, can reflect social realities and how mass media influences perceptions and social norms in society.

Methods

This research is conducted using a qualitative research method. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for exploring complex, contextual, and nuanced issues, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the subject matter. Given that the focus

of this study is on postcolonial ecocriticism in the movie, qualitative methods enable a detailed analysis of themes, narratives, and representations within cinematic texts. This approach facilitates an exploration of the intricate ways in which postcolonial histories and environmental concerns intersect and are depicted in the movie. As Creswell(2007) suggests, qualitative research is ideal for examining such multifaceted problems, as it provides the flexibility to interpret and understand the cultural and historical contexts that shape these cinematic portrayals. Thus, this method is perfectly aligned with the objectives of this study, allowing for a comprehensive examination of the selected scene in the movie through a postcolonial ecocritical lens.

Hellen Tiffin and Bill Huggan's (2016) concept of postcolonial ecocriticism provides a valuable theoretical framework for analyzing the themes of colonial entanglements and ecological power in the *Dune* movie. This framework emphasizes the interconnectedness of colonialism and environmental degradation, highlighting how colonial ideologies and practices shape human-environment relationships. According to (Ashcroft et al., 2000), colonialism often involves the exploitation and appropriation of natural resources from colonized territories, leading to environmental destruction and ecological imbalance. This process is driven by extractive industries seeking to extract maximum profit from colonial territories without regard for the long-term consequences on local ecosystems or indigenous communities.

In the *Dune* movie, the concept of postcolonial ecocriticism allows for an analysis of how the commodification of spice contributes to the environmental exploitation of Arrakis while reflecting deep-rooted issues of cultural marginalization. By examining the power dynamics between the colonial forces controlling spice production and the indigenous Fremen population, the study can elucidate how colonialism shapes environmental practices and perpetuates social inequalities on Arrakis.

Furthermore, postcolonial theory is also relevant for a deeper understanding of how this movie addresses issues of power and domination (Vincent, 2018). This theory highlights the relationship between colonization and liberation, and how colonial power structures persist in new forms in the postcolonial era. In this research, postcolonial theory can be used to analyze how the movie *Dune* depicts conflicts among the galaxies, how Arrakis is positioned in the hierarchy of power, and how the commodification of "spice" reflects colonial power dynamics.

In addition to these theories, an interdisciplinary approach can also provide valuable insights into understanding the issues discussed in this research. For example, ecological anthropology can offer perspectives on how humans interact with their ecosystems and how these interactions are influenced by political and economic power. Political sociology can also help analyze how power structures are formed and maintained, and how resistance to colonial domination can emerge.

Thus, research on "Colonial Entanglements and Ecological Power: Spice Commodification in *Dune* Movie" is not only relevant in movie analysis but also has broader implications for understanding the dynamics of colonial power, political ecology, and the commodification of natural resources. Through interdisciplinary approaches and the use of appropriate theories, this research is expected to provide a deeper understanding of how narratives of colonialism and commodification are reflected and questioned in popular culture.

Finding

The exploration of postcolonial ecocriticism within the movie "Dune" provides a rich framework for understanding the environmental and cultural implications of resource commodification. This theoretical approach allows us to look into how the movie portrays the complex dynamics between colonizers and indigenous populations, particularly in the context of ecological exploitation. It uncovers the commodification of the planet's natural resources reflects broader themes of economic dominance, cultural marginalization, and environmental degradation.

The Commodification of Spice In the Dune Movie Contribute to the Environmental Exploitation of Arrakis

In the opening minutes of the film, viewers are treated to stunning visuals of the desert of Planet Arrakis or Dune. The film's narrator, Chani, a native of the planet Arrakis, explains several things about spice, which is something contested on the planet's terrain. That clearly shows that spice is an object plundered by outsiders. She narrates the power dynamics of exploitation within the commodification of spice in the story, contributing to environmental exploitation on Arrakis. The portrayal of spice harvesters arriving at dusk highlights the economic urgency driving the spice collection process. The "outsiders" race against time to avoid the midday heat, exploiting the land of Arrakis to gather as much spice as possible in a short period.

This illustrates how the commodification of spice reinforces the economic dominance of foreign entities controlling the production and distribution of spice. In the theory of Hellen Tiffin and Huggan, this portrayal symbolizes the role of economic colonialism, where foreign powers control natural resources and disregard their impact on the environment and local communities. Therefore, this monologue illustrates how the commodification of spice in the movie Dune contributes to environmental exploitation on Arrakis by emphasizing how external economic interests prioritize environmental sustainability and the well-being of local communities.

That provides a profound insight into how the commodification of spice in the movie Dune contributes to the environmental exploitation of Arrakis. The statement "they ravage our lands in front of our eyes. their cruelty to my people is all I've known" (Villeneuve, 2021) depicts how the utilization of natural resources, such as spice, by foreign entities or colonizers, has caused serious environmental damage in the presence of the Fremen, the indigenous people of Arrakis. The monologue highlights how the practice of commodifying spice has led to blatant environmental destruction on the planet, where their lands are treated cruelly and ruthlessly.

In the theory of Postcolonial Ecocriticism (Huggan, 2016), what Chani narrate reflects deeper issues related to the cultural marginalization of the Fremen, the tribe where Chani belongs to. They not only witness the damaging environmental exploitation but also become victims of inhumane treatment by foreign entities dominating the spice harvesting on Arrakis. This indicates how the commodification of spice not only harms the environment but also creates significant social and cultural inequalities between the indigenous inhabitants of Arrakis and the foreign entities dominating the spice economy.

The other explained issue about the exploitation of spice is carried out by a group of people known as the Harkonnen. They became rulers there because they managed to control the commodification of spice. It highlights how the control of spice production by outsiders, such as the Harkonnens, has led to immense wealth for them. This indicates how spice commodification reinforces economic domination by foreign entities

controlling spice production. According to environmental exploitation theory, control over spice production empowers outsiders to regulate the spice collection process without considering its environmental impact. The wealth generated from spice commodification may drive extractive practices damaging the ecosystem of Arrakis, such as over-mining, deforestation, or the use of toxic chemicals. Therefore, it depicts how spice commodification contributes to environmental exploitation on Arrakis by handing economic control to outsiders who may not prioritize environmental sustainability.

The portrayal of Fremen attacks making spice harvesting extremely hazardous highlights the negative impact of such economic activities on the environment. Additionally, the movie reveals contrasting views on spice between the Fremen and the Imperium. For the Fremen, spice is a sacred hallucinogen that sustains life and provides significant health benefits. However, for the Imperium, spice is used by navigators of the spacing guild to find safe paths between the stars. Without spice, interstellar travel is impossible, emphasizing its status as the most valuable substance in the universe. Although spice holds significant cultural and medical value for the Fremen, its commodification by the Imperium leads to environmental exploitation on Arrakis. This exploitation may include the use of damaging agricultural techniques or destruction of natural habitats to increase spice production. This shows how spice commodification in the movie *Dune* contributes to environmental exploitation on Arrakis by portraying differing perspectives on the value and use of spice, ultimately reinforcing the drive to overexploit natural resources and damage the environment.

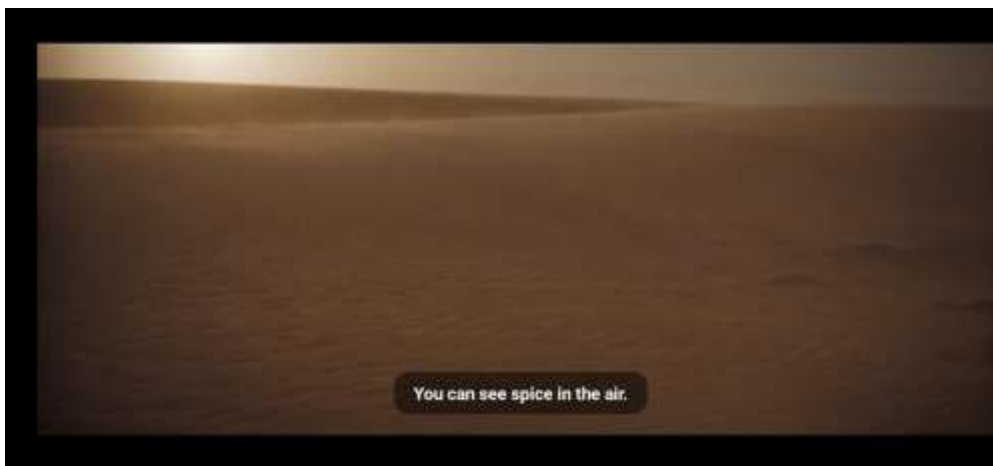


Fig 1. Arrakis Planet (Dune)

The movie also put another illustration on how the commodification of spice in the movie *Dune* contributes to environmental exploitation on Arrakis through the development of infrastructure and irresponsible economic practices. The emphasis on filling spice silos highlights the importance of spice production in the planet's economy. However, the hindrance caused by Harkonnen sabotage underscores the challenges in meeting production targets. Paul's question about who is responsible for overseeing and enforcing spice production rules indicates the ambiguity in the economic governance system and resource utilization of Arrakis.

This reflects the chaos and lack of oversight that may occur in the exploitation of natural resources, including excessive and environmentally damaging spice mining practices (Ruiz Serrano et al., 2024). Thus, the commodification of spice in the movie *Dune* contributes to environmental exploitation on Arrakis by demonstrating instability

in the resource management system and a lack of protection for the local ecosystem. This reflects how uncontrolled economic practices and inadequate supervision can lead to serious environmental damage on the planet.

Deep-Rooted Issues of Cultural Marginalization of The Fremen

Despite being the indigenous inhabitants of Arrakis and possessing rich local knowledge about their planet, the Fremen are considered "outsiders" in this process of spice harvesting. The emphasis on the race against time to avoid the midday heat suggests that the Fremen may not have full control over their own schedules and work processes, indicating how they are manipulated or disregarded by the colonial powers controlling the spice economy. Within the framework of Huggan (2016) theory, this portrayal reflects the systematic cultural marginalization by dominant colonial powers. The Fremen, despite their intimate connection to Arrakis and expertise in its ecology, are relegated to subordinate roles and lose agency in the exploitation of their own resources. This dynamic illustrates the power imbalances and cultural erasure perpetuated by colonialism, where the voices and knowledge of indigenous communities are suppressed for external interests. It is deeply ingrained cultural marginalization experienced by the Fremen and demonstrates the comprehensive impact of colonial domination on indigenous communities.

The movie also reveals the bitter experiences of the Fremen in facing inhumane treatment by foreign entities dominating the spice harvesting on Arrakis. This reflects deeper issues regarding the cultural marginalization of the Fremen, where they are not only overlooked in decision-making regarding the management of their natural resources but also subjected to cruel and unfair treatment. According to Hellen Tiffin and Huggan's theory, this portrayal exemplifies the cultural marginalization experienced by indigenous communities under colonial domination. The Fremen, despite their rightful claim to Arrakis and their deep connection to its ecology, are marginalized and deprived of agency in decisions impacting their livelihoods. This dynamic illustrates the enduring legacy of colonialism, where indigenous cultures are disregarded and oppressed for the benefit of external powers. This shows how the commodification of spice not only contributes to environmental exploitation on Arrakis but also reflects broader issues of social and cultural injustice experienced by the Fremen.



Fig. 2 The Fremen of Arrakis

The deep-rooted cultural marginalization of the Fremen in the *Dune* movie highlights how outsiders, specifically the Harkonnens, have wielded control over spice production on Arrakis for a considerable period, leading to immense wealth accumulation. This portrayal underscores the economic dominance and cultural marginalization experienced by the Fremen, the indigenous people of Arrakis. Despite their intimate connection to the planet and its resources, the Fremen are relegated to subordinate roles and stripped of agency in the exploitation of their resources. Through analysis by Tiffin and Huggan's theory, it becomes evident that the control over spice production by outsiders perpetuates a power dynamic that marginalizes the cultural identity and autonomy of the Fremen. Thus, it reflects the entrenched issues of cultural marginalization faced by the Fremen community within the broader narrative of spice commodification and power dynamics in the *Dune* universe.

Another cultural marginalization experienced by the Fremen portrayed in the Fremen's perspective on spice differs significantly from that of the Imperium. For the Fremen, spice holds profound cultural significance as a sacred hallucinogen that sustains life and provides immense health benefits. However, the Imperium views spice primarily as a commodity essential for interstellar travel, particularly for the navigators of the spacing guild. This stark contrast in perception reflects a fundamental cultural divide between the Fremen and the dominant powers of the Imperium. The Fremen's reverence for spice as a sacred substance underscores their deeply ingrained cultural values and traditions, which are marginalized and misunderstood by the Imperium. Despite the vital role of spice in their cultural and spiritual practices, the Fremen are relegated to a subordinate position within the larger political and economic framework of the Imperium. The Imperium's exploitation of spice for its purposes further marginalizes the cultural significance of spice for the Fremen, reducing it to a mere commodity in the eyes of the dominant society.

This sheds light on the cultural marginalization of the Fremen by highlighting how their sacred beliefs and practices are commodified and exploited by the Imperium for its gain. It underscores the unequal power dynamics and the imposition of dominant cultural norms on marginalized communities like the Fremen, perpetuating a cycle of marginalization and cultural erasure. Thus, it reflects the deep-rooted issues of cultural marginalization faced by the Fremen within the larger socio-political of the Imperium.

The movie also portrayed the cultural marginalization of the Fremen within the context of spice commodification. Paul's inquiry about who is responsible for arbitrating and overseeing the transition of spice production indicates a lack of representation or authority granted to the Fremen in the management of their resources. The fact that there is no clear authority or representation for the Fremen suggests that they are marginalized within the power structures governing spice production on Arrakis. Despite their intimate connection to the planet and its resources, the Fremen are excluded from decision-making processes and regulatory oversight, reflecting a broader pattern of cultural marginalization.



Fig. 3 The Harkonnens

It underscores how the commodification of spice perpetuates the marginalization of the Fremen, as they are denied agency and participation in determining the fate of their own environment and resources. It reflects a power dynamic where external forces, such as the Emperor and the Harkonnens, hold authority over spice production, sidelining the indigenous Fremen population and disregarding their cultural significance and rights. These colonial authorities impose their rule through military might and brutal oppression, failing to recognize the Fremen's deep knowledge of the desert and their critical role in maintaining the planet's ecosystem. The Fremen's sophisticated understanding of sandworm ecology, water conservation, and survival in harsh conditions is dismissed, and their contributions to the sustainability of the desert environment are overlooked. This dehumanizing perspective justifies the exploitation and harsh treatment of the Fremen, who are seen as mere obstacles to spice extraction rather than as integral to the planet's balance.

Despite their marginalization, the Fremen possess a strong spirit of resistance, symbolizing the resilience of indigenous populations against colonial oppression. Their alliance with Paul Atreides demonstrates their potential to reclaim control over their homeland and protect their way of life. This narrative mirrors real-world colonial histories where indigenous knowledge and rights are disregarded, and their cultures are exoticized and romanticized while their agency is undermined. The movie highlights the consequences of colonialism and the critical importance of recognizing and respecting the contributions and rights of marginalized communities.

Discussion

Based on the findings above, it can be said that the research aligns with what has been previously studied by Kennedy (2021) in her work titled "Spice and Ecology in Herbert's *Dune: Altering the Mind and the Planet*." In her research, Kennedy explains the metaphor of spice as a substitute for "oil" in the movie *Dune*, which is also exploited by external parties, while the planet Arrakis represents Iraq in the novel. Similarly to the findings of this research, Kennedy also concludes that mining spice in *Dune* can indeed have destructive effects on nature. The extraction of spice disrupts the ecological balance of the planet, leading to potential consequences such as ecological disruptions and compromised interconnectedness. The characters in the novel must grapple with the consequences of mining spice, as it not only alters the environment but also impacts individual lives and political decisions.

The political decisions in the film *Dune* clearly show a bias, especially when it comes to the native inhabitants of Arrakis, the Fremen. The Fremen face inevitable marginalization due to the interests of those in power. *Dune* challenges both readers and movie viewers to confront the consequences of environmental exploitation and advocates for a mindful approach to resource management. Conversely, in his journal, Durrani (2023) states that Herbert sees the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized as something that stand on the same line. No one is marginalized in this view because the Fremen are depicted as having a lot of power, implying that they are not subservient to a power structure and are not slaves to the system.

However, based on the analysis above, the author finds that the Fremen are marginalized in terms of their native culture. The Fremen are often targets of violence and repressive actions by colonial forces. They are treated harshly to ensure that they do not interfere with the spice mining operations. This aligns with Durrani's (2023) findings, which mention that the form of marginalization the Fremen experience is how political economy turns into an imperialism that dominates the entire planet's resources and ignores the fact that the Fremen characters are portrayed by people of color, while the Harkonnens and Atreides are portrayed by white actors.

Conclusion

Dune (Villeneuve, 2021) presents a rich tapestry of political, ecological, and cultural complexities centered around the commodification of the spice "melange." Through its narrative, the movie explores the intertwined dynamics of colonialism, environmental exploitation, and cultural marginalization. The Fremen, the indigenous people of Arrakis, are systematically oppressed by colonial powers like House Harkonnen and later House Atreides, who exploit their land for the valuable spice. This exploitation highlights how the Fremen's deep ecological knowledge and cultural practices are ignored and devalued, reinforcing their subjugation and the environmental degradation of Arrakis.

Moreover, *Dune* serves as a poignant reflection of real-world colonial histories, where the commodification of natural resources has led to the marginalization of indigenous communities. The Fremen's resistance and eventual alliance with Paul Atreides symbolize the resilience and potential for reclaiming autonomy in the face of oppressive forces. The movie underscores the necessity of recognizing and respecting the contributions and rights of marginalized communities, emphasizing the importance of integrating indigenous knowledge into broader socio-political and ecological frameworks. Through its portrayal of the Fremen's struggle, *Dune* calls attention to the enduring impact of colonialism and the urgent need for more equitable and sustainable practices.

References

- Abbas, H., Amin, Z., & Ahmad, R. (2023). Colonial Imprints on Nature: Ecocritical Explorations in Abdulrazak Gurnah's Afterlives. In *PJSEL* (Vol. 10, Issue 1). Online.
- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2000). *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts, Second Edition*.
- Bordwell, D., Thompson, K., & Smith, J. (2001). *This International Student Edition is for use outside of the U.S.*



- Creswell, J. W., Hanson, W. E., Clark Plano, V. L., & Morales, A. (2007). Qualitative Research Designs. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 35(2), 236–264. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000006287390>
- Durrani, H. (2023). Haris Durrani on Muslimness, Orientalism, and Imperialism in Dune. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 24(1), 78–85. <https://doi.org/10.1353/gia.2023.a897704>
- Huggan, G. and H. Tiffin. (2016). Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment. *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 52(1), 116.2–117. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/cqv104>
- Kennedy, K. (2021). Spice and Ecology in Herbert's Dune: Altering the Mind and the Planet. *Science Fiction Studies*, 48(3), 444–461. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sfs.2021.0079>
- Ruiz Serrano, A., Musumeci, A., Li, J. J., Ruiz Serrano, M., & Serrano Barquin, C. (2024). Rationality and the exploitation of natural resources: a psychobiological conceptual model for sustainability. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-024-04470-3>
- Storey, J. (2024). *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: Vol. V*.
- Syarif Rachmaji, A. (2022). *The Identity Politics Of The Spice Country Through The Spice Path Archives*.
- Villeneuve, D. (2021). *Dune* [Video recording]. Legendary Picture, Warner Bros.
- Vincent, S. (2018). An Eco-Critical Analysis of Climate Change and the Unthinkable in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction and Non-Fiction. *Humanities*, 7(2), 59. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h7020059>
- Williams, R. (1958). *Culture and society, 1780-1950*. Columbia University Press.