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Crude oil and its false promises of modernization

Petroleum encounters in modern Iranian fiction

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Introduction

This study focuses on the representation of petroleum in modern Iranian literature written between the 1940s and 2010s. I analyze the imagery and symbolism of oil, as well as how the oil encounter's cultural, social, and political effects are represented in what has become known as the genre of "petrofiction." My focus is on how this literature engages the Iranian historical context in which, since the early 20th century, the production and consumption of oil has created a particular form of "oil modernity" marked by rapid social, political, cultural, and economic transformations.

An article titled "The Persian Gulf Is Trapped by Oil Monsters" was published in the Iranian daily newspaper *Eghtesad Online* on 8 October 2019.¹ For decades, the article suggests, the "oil monster" has been a figure obsessively used in the political and social literature of Iran to highlight the damage caused to the country by petroleum. The article focuses on pollution, which is only one of the many detrimental effects petroleum has had on the Persian Gulf. The numbers provided are astounding; according to the research cited, approximately five million barrels of oil leak into the Gulf each year, damaging marine life and harming all creatures living in and around the Gulf, including humans. Another article in *Hamshahri*, from 14 October 2019, refers to the fact that Persian Gulf is considered to have a sensitive eco-system according the International Maritime Organization (Figure 0.1).² These articles show the destructive effect of oil and of the way it is being produced and traded, underscoring the urgency of studying petroleum in Iran as a tangible material and symbolic structure that, from when it was first extracted, has acted as the catalyst for radical social, political, and cultural changes, heralding a new era in the history of the Iranian people.

¹ "Khalij-e Fars Dar Dam-e Hayulay-e Nafti" ("The Persian Gulf is Trapped by Oil Monsters"), *Eghtesadonline magazine*, Accessed 14 October 2019. <https://www.eghtesadonline.com>.

² "Aludegi Nafti and Gheyr-e Nafti Ecosystem Khalij-e Fars Ra Hassas Karde Ast" (Petroleum and Non-petroleum Pollution Has Sensitized the Persian Gulf Ecosystem"), *ISNA (Iranian Students' News Agency)*, Accessed 14 October 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/3bhmdp2w>.



Figure 0.1. Photograph showing dead fish found in the Persian Gulf as a result of the pollution caused by petroleum, published in the Hamshahri newspaper on 14 October 2019

From the beginning of the 20th century, the Persian Gulf captured the world's attention due to the generous supplies of petroleum that were gradually discovered. The region started to attract people from all over the world, transforming it into one of the most strategic and geopolitically contested regions on earth. Such attention came with a heavy human cost, as millions of people have died in different petroleum-incited wars in the region, such as the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and the Persian Gulf War (2 August 1990-28 February 1991), fought between Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Thus, while petroleum was considered the core substance of modernity and progress in western countries, it manifested itself as a monster to many people in the Gulf region. In Iran, petroleum and the industry that emerged around it held out a mirage of future prosperity that never became a reality for most Iranians.

Iranian art, cinema, and literature about petroleum reveals the transformational effect oil had on the country during the 20th century. Much like in the rest of the world, petroleum brought modernity to Iran, transforming it so dramatically that cultural representations could not avoid including it. Petroleum, whether as a substance, an industry, or a cultural phenomenon yielding particular imaginations of Iran and its place in the world, appeared in different shapes in modern Iranian art, literature, and cinema. Literature has been the most popular cultural form in Iran for more than a thousand years and started to engage with petroleum in the second half of the 20th century, most prominently after the coup d'état of

1953.³ It has reflected on the effects of the oil encounter in different forms and styles, from poems to fables, from realism to allegory, and from explicit social criticism to satire.

Studying literary representations of petroleum helps us to understand the impact of this substance on the formation and development of modern Iran and, more specifically, the role played in this by the formation of oil company towns in the south of the country. It also reveals the growing influence of other cultures on Iran in the wake of the birth of the oil industry, which led, for example, to a surge in translations of international literary works, specifically American and Russian ones, into Persian. By looking primarily at literature, but also at some other cultural productions reflecting on the oil encounter, the colonial characteristics of the oil company towns in Khuzestan province and the often-traumatic experiences of local communities in and around these towns, which do not receive a lot of attention in historical accounts, can be understood better. The same goes for the influence of petroleum on the living conditions of Iranians, particularly during the petroleum boom in the 1960s and 1970s, when it had a direct impact on the (forced) modernization imposed on women, the establishment of schools and universities, and the construction of roads, railroads, and airports.

While the main focus of this study is on modern Iranian prose fiction, several films written and directed by Ebrahim Golestan will also be analyzed, most notably *The Secret of the Treasure at Ghost Valley* from 1979. This film was made during the emergence of a new wave of cinema in Iran and focuses on the effects of imported modernization. In addition, some photographs of the early years of the oil encounter displayed in the BP Museum and the Petroleum Museum of Iran will be close-read in order to support the analysis of literary texts dealing with this period. The main prose fictions to be analyzed are, in chronological order: Sadeq Hedayat's "The Case of the Anti-Christ's Donkey" (1944); Jalal Al-e Ahmad's *The Tale of the Beehives* (1954); Ahmad Mahmoud's "The Little Native Boy" (1971), "Our Small Town" (1971), and *Neighbors* (1974); Naser Taqvayi's *The Summer of That Year* (1969); Mohammad Reza Safdari's "Siasanbu" and "Akusia" (1979); Ebrahim Golestan's *The Secret of the Treasure at Ghost Valley* (1974); Moniru Ravanipour's *The Drowned* (1989); Zoya Pirzad's *Things We Left Unsaid* (2001), and Farhad Keshvari's *Songs of the Dead* (2014).⁴ These works were chosen because the events, locations, and characters in them are closely

³ What is known in Iran as the 28th Mordad coup d'état was a CIA-assisted coup to overthrow Iran's then prime minister, Mohammad Mossadeq, in favor of the King, Mohammad Reza Shah. The coup took place two years after oil nationalization in 1951, which was enforced by Mohammad Mossadeq through the international courts. The coup was managed and controlled by the United States under the name "Operation Ajax" and the United Kingdom under the name "Operation Boot." For a comprehensive analysis of the coup, see Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations* (The New Press, 2013).

⁴ Quotations from texts not available in English have been translated by the author..

related to the oil industry. Except for Sadeq Hedayat, all authors were either born in oil company towns, or traveled or lived there.

The Cultural Meaning of Oil and the Energy Humanities

Despite its huge impact on society, both in terms of its production and its consumption, petroleum has received relatively little attention from a cultural perspective; it has been approached mainly as a chemical substance and a source of state revenue. This study approaches oil not as an economic asset, but as a commodity that embodies and creates cultural meanings. It aims to show how modern fiction in Iran was transformed through the nation's encounter with oil, and how this encounter was, in turn, given cultural meaning in modern Iranian fiction. In doing so, this research positions itself within the emerging field of the energy humanities and its subfield of petroculture, which has produced a considerable number of studies on cultural and artistic manifestations of oil in various contexts. By studying modern Iranian fiction, this research makes two important contributions. Firstly, it introduces a new perspective in the field of Iranian literary criticism by looking at modern Iranian literature from an energy humanities point of view. Secondly, it reveals the connections between energy humanities work concentrating on different regions of the world.

I will develop these contributions by using cultural analysis. Cultural analysis is an interdisciplinary approach that puts cultural objects in dialogue with concepts that are capable of traveling across disciplines. As Mieke Bal asserts in the introduction to *The Practice of Cultural Analysis*, cultural analysis “entertains an ambivalent relation to history as it has been traditionally practiced in our faculties.”⁵ She proceeds to explain:

Far from being indifferent to history, cultural analysis problematizes history's silent assumption in order to come to an understanding of the past that is different. This understanding is not based on an attempt to isolate and enshrine the past in an objective “reconstruction,” nor on an effort to project it on an evolutionist line not altogether left behind in current historical practice.⁶

This means that cultural analysis does not try to fill gaps in history, but rather to understand the present better by studying the past. Bal adds that “cultural analysis seeks to understand the

⁵ Mieke Bal and Bryan Gonzales, eds. *The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation* (Stanford University Press, 1999), 1.

⁶ Bal and Gonzales, eds., 1.

past as *part of* the present, as what we have around us, and without which no culture would be able to exist.”⁷

So far, the Iranian petroleum industry has primarily been studied from a historical point of view. Historians like Touraj Atabaki, Kaveh Ehsani, Peyman Jafari, and Maral Jefroudi have traced the history of the petroleum industry. In Iranian literary studies, there have also been some analyses of oil workers as characters.⁸ Yet cultural analysis is different from what has been practiced as historiography or literary analysis so far. By connecting the past (history) to the present (culture), cultural analysis “entertains an ambivalent relation to history as it is or has been traditionally practiced in our faculties.”⁹ As Bal notes, the aim is not to try to “reconstruct” history, but rather to “see[k] to understand the past as part of the present.”¹⁰ Bal’s searchlight, moreover, is based on culture as the basis of cultural analysis, which makes gestures, exposures, and narratives, the subjects that do this gesturing, exposing and narrating, and the subjects that are objectified by being gestured at, exposed, and narrated by others the major topics of cultural analysis. This study goes beyond the existing scholarship by presenting a cultural analysis of Iranian literary texts in which the oil encounter plays a central role, with a special focus on how, when, and by whom the history of this encounter has been told.

I refer to the fictions I analyze as belonging to the genre of “petrofiction,” a term coined by Amitav Ghosh in his review of Abdulrahman Munif’s novel *Cities of Salt* (1984) to designate fictional works that assign oil a vital role in shaping the social experiences, cultural identities, values, practices, political ideas, and actions of people living in oil-producing regions.¹¹ While fictional, the genre of petrofiction is inspired by historical events, conditions, and places. In tracing people’s everyday encounters with the oil industry and its wide-ranging effects, it forms a counternarrative to the dominant financial, technical, and institutional narratives about oil (corporations). Thus, petrofiction can be considered as a distinctive literary genre geared towards critical reflections on the human (and environmental) costs of the global oil industry.

⁷ Bal and Gonzales, eds., 1, emphasis in text.

⁸ On workers’ literature in Iran, see Faramarz Soltani, *Adabiat Kargari Iran Dar Qarn Moaser (Iran’s Workers’ Literature of this Century)* (Aknun, 2009).

⁹ Bal and Gonzales, eds., 1.

¹⁰ Bal and Gonzales, eds., 1.

¹¹ This genre is not limited to the Persian Gulf countries, where much of the world’s oil production is concentrated. Rather, it is concerned with the role of oil in literature across the world, in works such as *Oil!* (1927) by Upton Sinclair, *Greenvoe* (1972) by G. Backay Brown, and *Oil on Water* (2010) by Helon Habila, which I will introduce in the section below on “Central Themes of Global Petroleum Fiction.”

In its analysis of the selected corpus of novels and short stories, this study focuses on how these texts envision the Iranian encounter with oil as involving questions of tradition and modernity, semi-coloniality and post-coloniality, center and periphery, gender and class relations, nostalgia, and trauma. Primarily, this study traces the footprints of petroleum in modern Iranian literature, elucidating how it reflects upon oil as a substance, a source of revenue, and a cultural concept, and connecting these reflections to the historical contexts in which the selected works were produced.

As part of the historical context of Iranian petrofiction, this study draws particular attention to the characteristics of petroleum company towns. Most of the fictions I will discuss are set in the petroleum regions of Iran, located in the southwestern part of the country, particularly in the towns of Abadan, Ahwaz, and Masjed Soleyman. However, the setting of the novels and stories is not limited to these regions. Sadeq Hedayat's "The Case of the Anti-Christ's Donkey" (1944), Jalal Al-e Ahmad's *The Tale of the Beehives* (1954), and Ebrahim Golestan's *The Secret of the Treasure at Ghost Valley* (1974) are set in undefined locations and concerned with the impact of oil revenues on Iran in general.

In Khuzestan, known as Iran's petroleum province, petroleum radically changed the geographical and social landscape. Cities appeared, districts flourished, and people emigrated to this region from different parts of Iran and the rest of the world. Fictional works like Ahmad Mahmoud's "Our Small Town" (1971) and *Neighbors* (1974), which will be discussed in Chapter 3, represent the complicated lives of the local citizens in these cities. They also portray the uprising of the people, particularly low-ranked workers, against the colonial set-up of the oil company and the segregated nature of the company towns.

By looking at Iranian petrofiction, this study seeks to contribute to the energy humanities, a rapidly growing field of academic scholarship that focuses attention on the impact of different sources of energy on the life and culture of people around the globe. One of the main branches of the field of energy humanities is petroculture studies, which began at the University of Alberta in 2012. Petroculture, as defined in the volume *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, edited by Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, and Imre Szeman, "position[s] oil and energy as the fulcrum around which many of today's most pressing social, economic, and political issues must be analyzed and understood."¹² It seeks to describe petroleum culture in

¹² Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, and Imre Szeman, eds., *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 4.

order to make it possible to ultimately imagine a world without fossil fuels, a petroleum-free culture.

In the 2014 book *Oil Culture*, Allen Stoelk is quoted answering the question of “what is oil culture?” as follows:

Oil is natural in the sense that no one put it there in the ground: it is the result of natural processes, the arrested decomposition of plant and organic matter over millions of years. And yet everything that is done with it - the pumping, the refining, the grading, the distribution, the use in transport, manufacture, heating, the generation of electricity - is fully cultural.¹³

In their introduction to this book, Ross Barret and Daniel Worden argue that for the cultural analysis of oil it is important to consider oil as “both an industry and a culture, a business and a set of aesthetic practices, a natural resource and a trope.”¹⁴ They insist that the humanities should engage with oil as a “cultural material,” making it a “force not only in economic and political life but also in everyday experience and aesthetics.”¹⁵ In other words, oil is a material without which the modern world cannot be imagined, and petroleum studies describes and analyzes the particular modern culture that is produced through and around this material. In *Living Oil* (2014), Stephanie LeMenager explains the broader aspects of petroleum culture as including “petroleum media [and] the objects derived from petroleum that mediate our relationship, as humans, to other humans, to other life, and to things.”¹⁶ She looks at petroleum culture in the specific context of the United States and states that her most important concern is to criticize the centrality of petroleum to North American modern life as “based on the cheap energy system made possible by oil.”¹⁷ Although the terms “oil culture,” as used by Stoelk, and “petroleum culture,” as used by LeMenager, are equally apt to designate the cultural dimension of oil, this study will primarily employ the term “petroculture”, as it is used more widely in the energy humanities. In the following section, I will unpack the role of literature about oil or “petrofiction” as not only a crucial part of petroculture, but also capable of critiquing it.

¹³ Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden, eds., *Oil Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), xii.

¹⁴ Barrett and Worden, eds., xxi.

¹⁵ Barrett and Worden, eds., xx.

¹⁶ Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 6.

¹⁷ LeMenager, 67.

Central Themes of Global Petrofiction

In “Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel,” Amitav Ghosh states that “if the spice trade has any twentieth century equivalent, it can be the oil industry.”¹⁸ He continues by wondering why oil has not nurtured as much literature as the spice trade did. While it took only a decade after the discovery of the sea route to India for *The Lusiads*, a 1572 poem by the Portuguese poet Luis de Camoes, to appear,

the oil encounter, in contrast, has produced scarcely a single work of note. In English, for example, it has generated little apart from some more or less second-rate travel literature and a vast amount of academic ephemera—nothing remotely of the quality or the intellectual distinction of the travelogues and narratives produced by such sixteenth-century Portuguese writers.¹⁹

Ghosh explains this difference by contrasting the pride that was taken by the colonial powers in the spice trade with the taboo associated with oil, both by the Americans as its main discoverers and by the people of the non-Western places in which it was found:

To the principal protagonists in the oil encounter (which means, in effect, Americans on the one hand, and the people of the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf on the other), the history of oil is a matter of embarrassment verging on the unspeakable, the pornographic. It is perhaps the one cultural issue on which the two sides are in complete agreement.²⁰

Ghosh’s argument that, until 1992, Americans, Middle Easterners, and even Bengalis, great travel writers working in the oil fields of the Persian Gulf, did not write about the oil encounter overlooks that a considerable number of works had, in fact, been written on it. While some of these works may never have been published, remained unnoticed in the corners of libraries, or were studied from different points of view, many were in fact widely read and commented on. As Peter Hitchcock explains in “Oil in an American Imaginary” in 2010, in response to Ghosh, oil was not absent from the American imaginary and American literature at all.²¹ As one example, he mentions *Oil!* (1926) by Upton Sinclair, which deals with the oil encounter in the southern Californian oil fields in the early years of the 20th century.

¹⁸ Amitav Ghosh, “Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel,” in *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007), 138.

¹⁹ Ghosh, 138.

²⁰ Amitav Ghosh, *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007), 138. Ghosh explains that, for Americans, oil “reeks of unavoidable overseas entanglements, a worrisome foreign dependency, economic uncertainty, [and] risky and expensive military enterprises” (139).

²¹ Peter Hitchcock, “Oil in an American Imaginary,” *New Formations* 69 (2010): 81–97, <https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF.69.04.2010>.

Although Ghosh exaggerated the scarcity of literature about oil, his text did initiate an intensified interest in such literature among literary critics on a global scale and launch the term “oil encounter.” Ghosh, whose focus is on *Cities of Salt*, defines the oil encounter as involving “America and Americans on the one hand, and the people of the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf on the other,” ignoring that petroleum colonization in the Middle East began with the British, followed by the Dutch and only then the Americans. In terms of what the literature of this encounter, which has become known as petrofiction, looks like, Graeme Macdonald, in “Monstrous Transformer: Petrofiction and World Literature,” writes:

Oil encounter novels typically focus on initial discovery and extraction, but in some cases the refining, storage, transportation and circulation of petroleum and oil-based products come to the fore, and likewise the productivity regimes that develop with, in and around this new resource space.²²

In other words, this literature talks about the political and cultural spheres that surround the production, sale, and consumption of petroleum. The fact that petrofiction spans different literary genres and forms, from realistic fiction, science fiction, and experimental fiction to graphic novels, enables it to engage with the oil encounter in diverse ways.

Among the early works of petrofiction overlooked by Ghosh are the works of Iranian petrofiction that I will discuss in this study. It is not surprising that Ghosh was not aware of these works, given the lack of English translations. Together with the recent translation into English of two major Iranian petrofictions, Ahmad Mahmoud’s *Neighbors* (in 2013 by Nastaran Kherad) and Zoya Pirzad’s *Things We Left Unsaid* (in 2012 by Franklin Lewis), this study will hopefully draw the attention of more critics and scholars to Iranian petrofiction and its complex representation of the crucial role played by the oil industry in the shaping of modern Iran.

In the remainder of this section, I will identify four themes that are central to petrofiction – petroleum coloniality, petroleum modernity, labor, and the environment – and discuss the importance of each of these themes for my corpus of Iranian petrofiction.

1. *Petroleum Colonialism*

The contact between locals and foreign petroleum exploiters is referred to by Ghosh as the main plot element of the oil encounter narrative. Munif’s *Cities of Salt* is introduced as

²² Graeme Macdonald, “Oil and World Literature,” *American Book Review* 33, no. 3 (2012): 293, <https://doi.org/10.1353/abr.2012.0079>.

featuring an example of this encounter. The story begins with three Americans in Wadi Al-Uyoun who are looking for water. Mitheb Al-halal, the protagonist, becomes suspicious of their presence and, soon enough, foreigners enter Wadi al-Uyoun with a “huge iron machine”²³ and other equipment to establish one of Saudi Arabia’s first petroleum sites. Another example of the oil encounter occurs in Ghosh’s own first novel *The Circle of Reason* (1985). This is the story of a boy named Alu, the Hindi word for potato. Alu is suspected of being a terrorist and escapes from the police by leaving his village near Calcutta and moving to the Persian Gulf city of Al-Ghazira, a fictional setting very similar to southern cities of Persian Gulf such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi. There, he witnesses the growing tensions between the oil company and the company town built beside it, and the rest of Al-Ghazira, which is gradually taken over:

For many years things went on, uneasily but peacefully: the oilmen stayed inside the oil town with their hirelings; the Malik was more or less a prisoner in the oil front, allowed out only on state occasions... the oil town prospered and grew, and the time came when they wanted more space. They took permission and went around Al-Ghazira looking for some more land...²⁴

In this story, Ghosh emphasizes the fraught relations between locals and foreigners living in segregated oil towns.

Another influential novel centered on the encounter between locals and foreign oilmen is *Texaco* (1992) by Patrick Chamoiseau. *Texaco* takes place in Martinique, an island in the Eastern Caribbean Sea. The novel is named after the oil company Texaco, whose neocolonial relations to the Martinique people the novel describes. Like many other petrofictions, it presents the locals as marginalized by the Western company. *Texaco* won many prizes and was selected as a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year in 1997.

A famous non-fictional text about the encounter between locals and an occupier oil company is *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary* (1995), a prison memoir written by the anti-oil activist and writer Ken Saro-Wiwa about the Nigerian petroleum lands. It was published by Penguin Books one month after Saro-Wiwa’s execution on 10 November 1996 by the Nigerian authorities due to his active participation in the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). The autobiography details the uprising of MOSOP against Royal Dutch Shell and Nigeria’s military rulers. It focuses on the semi-colonial nature of the oil company and how it obtains and destroys native land. In the chapter called “Pipedreams: Ken

²³ ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif, *Cities of Salt* (Vintage Books, 1989), 98.

²⁴ Amitav Ghosh, *The Circle of Reason* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005), 252. Malik is one of the oil workers.

Saro-Wiwa, Environmental Justice, and Micro-minority Rights” of his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon writes the following about Saro-Wiwa:

Saro-Wiwa saw himself as part of that testimonial tradition, a witness to what he called the “recolonization” of Ogoniland by the joint forces of the oil companies and the Abacha regime, which together have turned the Niger Delta into a Bermuda Triangle for human rights.²⁵

Saro-Wiwa’s most famous phrase is his assertion that “the flares of Shell are flames of hell,” which is part of a longer poem on the spoilation of the land of his people. In this poem, Saro-Wiwa addresses the gas flares which burn on top of the oil wells, suggesting that the existence of the company directly and negatively impacts the lives of the locals.²⁶

As I will show in this study, anti-foreigner movements and struggles against the colonial nature of foreign oil companies pervade Iranian petrofiction as well. Although Iran was never colonized, it was afflicted by what Hamid Dabashi calls “semi-colonization” since the early 19th century, as Britain and Russia imposed their political and economic interests on the country.²⁷ Semi-colonialism indicates that it was not the entire country that was under the control of a foreign state, as was the case in, for example, India and Malaysia. However, the whole of Iran was nonetheless influenced by the localized interference of Britain and Russia. The discovery of oil reinforced this semi-colonial condition, as Iranian oil became controlled by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), renamed British Petroleum (BP) in 1954. Displacement, identity crises, segregation, bilingualism, hybridity, and marginalization are among the effects of semi-colonialism that are highlighted in Iran’s petrofictions. All these petrofictions show that APOC/BP exerted considerable power over the Iranian state, oil workers, and their communities. In the first half of the 20th century, APOC functioned as a state within a state, with its own police force in southern Iran. As a result, the relationship between the oil company on the one hand, and the workers and their communities on the other, was not simply one of employer and employee, but one of semi-colonial powers and the colonized. Eventually, this situation gave rise to a nationalist movement among the Iranian population that managed to nationalize Iranian oil production in 1951. The 1953 coup d’état against the architect of oil nationalization, Mohammad Mossadeq, partly restored the power of the British and the Americans, and involved more international oil companies in Iran. The semi-colonial conditions, which weakened after 1951, were reflected in the privileged status of foreign

²⁵ Rob Nixon, “Pipedreams: Ken Saro-Wiwa, Environmental Justice, and Micro-Minority Rights,” in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 105.

²⁶ Ken Saro-Wiwa, *A Month and A Day & Letters*, 1st Edition (Ayebia Clarke Publishing, 2005), 54.

²⁷ Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire* (Routledge, 2008), 110.

managers and the influential role played by Britain and the US, before and after WWII respectively, in Iranian politics.

As Iran's conditions of semi-coloniality and post-coloniality are closely related to oil, this study looks at the ways in which they have been represented in Iranian petrofiction. It traces how these petrofictions reflected on the emergence of a national identity and its coming into crisis around the 1953 coup d'état and the Iranian Revolution of the late 1970s. Furthermore, it analyses the way these petrofictions engaged with the cultural impacts of semi-colonialism and contributed to the creation of anti-colonial and anti-foreigner movements.

2. *Petroleum Modernity*

Graeme MacDonald, a prominent petroleum culture scholar, believes that one of the most important elements of the oil encounter is its transformative ability. As he makes clear, the oil encounter cannot be reduced to the specific interpersonal encounter between Americans and local Arabs or Iranians on the shores of the Persian Gulf, but should be considered as a much wider, ideological encounter between the new and the old, and the modern and the traditional. The oil encounter, in this regard, marks the way petro-capitalism changes the space, time, and culture of wherever it arrives, not just through the material appearance of oil and the infrastructures of the oil industry, but also through the values associated with oil metaphorically or symbolically.

The most famous example of a petrofiction that reveals the transformational capacity of the oil encounter is the novel *Oil!* (1927) by Upton Sinclair. *Oil!* delineates how a gold and silver digger eventually becomes an oil tycoon, and highlights the direct impact of the oil industry in south California on the development of Californian culture and Hollywood. Another novel that engages with this theme is *Greenvoe* (1972), by the Scottish author George Mackay Brown. The novel, according to Macdonald, is about the "rapid deformation of the landscape and community of Hellya, a tiny fictional Scottish island in the Orkney archipelago in the North Sea" that stands in for the real oil city of Aberdeen.²⁸ The novel illustrates how the life of a fisherman is ruined by the arrival of the oil industry. Similar to other petrofictions from the 1960s and 1970s, it illustrates the emergence of local communities into the age of the oil boom. Macdonald mentions that the novel was "published three years after the 1969 discovery of oil in the North Sea Continental Shelf, and two years prior to the first on-stream production."²⁹

²⁸ Graeme Macdonald, "'Monstrous Transformer': Petrofiction and World Literature," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 53, no. 3 (2017): 294, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2017.1337680>.

²⁹ Macdonald, 294.

Similarly to the stories of the oil encounter in the Persian Gulf that will be discussed later in this study, *Greenvoe* stresses the industry's alienation of the local community. In his study, Macdonald compares *Greenvoe* and *Cities of Salt*, arguing that:

Both [novels] convey emblematic, and eminently comparable, "oil shock" scenes that exemplify the typically aggressive destruction and transformation produced by the pursuit of petroleum across the world-system's oil-bearing regions.³⁰

Macdonald's comparative study is very important in showing that the displacement of locals by the oil industry is not limited to non-Western countries.

Abdul-Rahman Munif published *Cities of Salt* in 1982, ten years after *Greenvoe*. *Cities of Salt* is about the forced modernization of Wadi Al-Uyun, a small green area in the middle of the desert in Saudi Arabia. Macdonald refers to the movement of oil extracting machines into this area as "monstrous technologies," while Ellen McLarney refers to the oil encounter as inaugurating the "empire of the machine."³¹ A similar transformation is described in Moniru Ravanipour's *Drowned* (1989), which deals with the arrival of British oil explorers on the northern shores of the Persian Gulf in Iran's Bushehr province, and which will be analyzed in Chapter 5.

Men in the Sun (1962) by Ghassan Kanafani, a Palestinian writer living in exile in Beirut, makes clear that the transformation of local culture by the oil encounter results from the need for workers and manifests as a process of forced modernization. McLarney, in "Empire of Machine: Oil in Arabic Novels," describes how *Cities of Salt* and *Men in the Sun* respond to this process, arguing that both novels are framed as a kind of "lamentation over the fall from the garden":

Kanafani and Munif dwell by the ruins, mourning the loss of their homeland while depicting the tortured birth of the mechanical age. Born out of the steel womb of trucks and iron pillars of oil pumps, this is no natural thing but an alien presence in the land, an inorganic plant in the native soil.³²

Similarly, Macdonald indicates that the displacement of Arab people and the alien, dystopian quality of the oil industry in the Gulf are shared subjects of novels about the industry's forced modernization attempts. These themes are also prominent in the Iranian

³⁰ Macdonald, 293.

³¹ Macdonald, 299. Ellen McLarney, "'Empire of the Machine': Oil in the Arabic Novel," *Boundary 2* 36, no. 2 (May 1, 2009): 177–98, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-2009-010>.

³² McLarney, 180.

petrofictions that I will discuss, all of which engage with the fast material and cultural transformation of the region by the oil encounter, especially during the era of peak oil (the petroleum boom) from the 1960s to the 1980s. In Iran, this is the era that produced most petroleum fictions, as I will make clear in my first chapter on the history of modern Persian literature and the oil encounter.

In Iranian literature, it can be clearly seen that petrofiction is a product of oil modernity. This form of modernity is a direct result of the impact of oil, which changed transportation infrastructures; increased mobility; transformed agricultural areas into industrial zones; turned villages and small towns into urban centers; changed old ways of working and living by introducing industrial ethics and discipline, as well as a different awareness of time and progress; changed old identities centered around ethnicity, tribes, and kinship, while creating new ones around family, citizenship, and class; and led to mass political participation. All of these transformations are portrayed in Iranian petrofiction and related to the opposition of tradition versus modernity, whether it is conceived of as an absolute dichotomy producing either traditional or modern subjects, or as more of a continuum giving rise to fluid and hybrid identities. In Iranian petrofiction, attention is focused on the events and places that symbolize the transformation of tradition into modernity, or the internal contradictions of these concepts, as well as on the ways in which the protagonists of the novels are trying to make sense of their position in relation to tradition and modernity.

It should be noted that the question of modernity and modernization in Iran and elsewhere is a complicated one. As Ramin Jahanbegloo et al. assert in the introduction of *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity*, what happened in Iran over the past 150 years appears as a tension between modernity and tradition. Jahanbegloo et al. add that the encounter between these two is “too complex to be simply characterized as a monolithic conflict between the liberal and enlightened values of ‘modernity’ on one side, and the dark and backward forces of ‘tradition’ on the other.”³³ In Iran, modernity is defined first of all in terms of the emergence of a new subjectivity in which the individual plays a central role, and develops the idea that this individual is not an object of eternal laws, but can be part of changing their own conditions. This goes beyond equating tradition with Islam and the Middle East, and modernity with the West. As my analyses will show, Iranian petrofiction emphasizes that hybrid identities incorporating traditional elements are formed in modernizing societies.

³³ Ramin Jahanbegloo et al., *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity* (Lexington Books, 2004), x.

Although in Iran the flow of oil brought its politics, values, and technologies from the West, it did not fully reproduce the West in a new geography, because Iranians continued to draw on their own cultural resources as they reacted to and sometimes resisted the sociopolitical consequences of oil, most notably the enforcement of a Western modernity, changing them in the process, and creating new realities. In this study, the concepts of tradition and modernity will be primarily explored under the shadow of the semi-colonial characteristics of the petroleum industry in southern Iran.

3. *Labor*

Petrofiction emphasizes the enormous amount of labor that petroleum extraction takes, as is clear, for example, from Sinclair's *Oil!* (1926) and Munif's *Cities of Salt* (1984). Since the age of oil is also known as the age of the rise of the machine, it marks the beginning of a series of changes in labor practices, including the rise of syndicates and unions, and their representation in literature. By looking at petroleum fictions written about different extraction sites, it becomes clear that the way labor appears depends on the company and country represented, as well as on the relation between the company and the state. For example, the labor in *Oil!*, which takes place in southern California, and in *Greenvoe* (2004), which takes place in northern Scotland, is portrayed very differently from the labor in Mohammad Reza Safdari's *Siasanbu and Other Stories* (1979), which is that of the low-ranked workers of Abadan. Moreover, resistance against companies manifests differently in countries which have their own oil companies, such as the US or the UK, than in those which host foreign oil companies, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Nigeria. A good early example of a reflection on the latter situation is *The White Rose* (1927), written by the German author B. Traven; it concerns the Californian Condor Oil Company's effects on White Rose Hacienda, in the Veracruz region of Mexico. This novel is very critical of the presence of the American owners of the oil company and their exploitation of the local workers. The story focuses on the tense relationship between the inhabitants of the hacienda and the owners of the oil company, while also attacking the central Mexican government's lax policies regarding working conditions and addressing the environmental damage caused by the extraction of oil.

In Ghassan Kanafani's previously mentioned novel *Men in the Sun*, the exploitation of oil workers is an important theme, as three Palestinians die on the way to a petroleum site in Kuwait. Dreaming of a thriving life, they find a man who smuggles workers to Kuwait inside a tanker on the back of a truck. Their death in the tanker after days of traveling is the climax of the story. In the novel, Kuwait is described as "Madina Fazela," which means "the utopian land

of these refugees.” The Palestinians risk their lives in order to reach this imagined utopia, but die before even seeing it in the distance. McLarney writes about Kanafani’s opinions of the oil industry, arguing that he “sees petroleum revenues as essential to the survival of the Palestinians, as a lifeline to the dispossessed.”³⁴ The novel, however, ultimately presents a critical view of the oil industry in Kuwait that emphasizes the misguidedness of the Palestinians’ imagination of it as a utopia.

As I will show, labor is a prominent theme in Iranian petroleum fiction as well. In fact, before the concept of petrofiction became fashionable, the texts analyzed here as petrofictions were categorized under the rubrics of “labor literature” or “provincial literature” by scholars of modern Persian literature, and were seen as supportive of leftist labor uprisings. In the petrofictions I will analyze, the Iranian oil encounter is frequently represented as revolving around the local workers’ reactions to the bad working conditions in the petroleum sites of Abadan and Ahwaz. Recruited as low-ranked unskilled workers, the living conditions of local workers were worlds away from those of the foreign employees who lived in segregated company districts.

4. *The Environment*

The first petrofiction expressing concerns about the environmental impact of oil extraction was the novel *Petroleum, Petroleum* by the Austrian writer Gustav Meyrink. Written in 1903 and belonging to the canon of German literature, this speculative novel predicted an oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, a prediction that came true in 2010 with the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The novel describes a magnate who discharges oil into the Gulf of Mexico, with locals unable to locate the source of the problem and thus unable to stop the spill. At the time of publication, the novel was classified as a work of science fiction.

The 2011 graphic novel *Oil and Water* by Steve Duin and Shanon Wheeler depicts the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, focusing not only on the immediate environmental disaster, but also on the problems that came in its aftermath. The author and environmentalist Bill McKibben writes, in the introduction to the graphic novel, that there is no foreseeable end to this oil disaster and that the disaster, despite its scale, has not changed the oil industry:

I’m writing this introduction exactly a year after the Deepwater Horizon blew in the Gulf of Mexico, sending enormous quantities of oil into the ocean and shutting down normal life for at least a summer along the shores of Louisiana and Mississippi. Twelve months later, we know a few things: much of the oil was burned, skimmed, or dispersed with chemicals. Much of it

³⁴ McLarney, “Empire of the Machine,” 185.

remained, probably along the bottom of the sea. And BP is still in the same business it was before, along with its compatriots around the Gulf.³⁵

Under the very same title, in *Oil and Water* (2013), Mei Mei Evans wrote about the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill in the Gulf of Alaska, criticizing the modern world's dependency on oil and detailing the lasting damage the oil caused to Alaskan waters.

The oil novel *Men in the Sun* (1962), which I have already discussed, is considered by some critics as a novel reflecting upon the problem of global warming before this term came into general use. When the Palestinian men are in the oil tanker on their way to Kuwait, they die of heat and hunger, which the driver only finds out upon reaching their destination. Andreas Malm, in his article "This Is the Hell That I Have Heard Of: Some Dialectical Images in Fossil Fuel Fiction," notes that

two physical forces shape their journey: the infrastructure of oil, and heat. They travel around pipelines, on an asphalt road, behind a roaring engine, eyes set on a kingdom whose promise of at least a decent living wage shimmers in the ubiquitous sun; the substance of oil itself drips into the text from multiple points.³⁶

According to Malm, in emphasizing the heat, Kanafani is thematizing climate change already in 1962, "long before he could have known about climate change."³⁷ The oppressive heat which comes from the pipes, the men's bodies, the earth, and the tanker is similar to the heat we are experiencing nowadays and which has become a topic of political and social debate. In a very symbolic way, the novel refers to the deathly aspects of the sun over the heads of the men who are willing to risk their lives to travel to Kuwait to work in the oil industry.

The engagement of Iranian petroleum fiction with environmental issues is not yet very considerable. One reason for this could be the fact that in the 1980s the setting of much petrofictions transformed into a war zone. Writers are still trying to work through the trauma of eight years of one of the deadliest wars of the 20th century. Another reason is that in recent years environmental activism has been considered a political act against the central government of Iran. In the petrofictions I will discuss here, there is some implicit and symbolic engagement with the environmental impact of the oil industry, but it is not the main focus. The following section will detail the main themes touched upon by Iranian petroleum fiction.

³⁵ Steve Duin and Shannon Wheeler, *Oil and Water* (Fantagraphics Books, 2011), 1.

³⁶ Andreas Malm, "This Is the Hell That I Have Heard of: Some Dialectical Images in Fossil Fuel Fiction," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 53, no. 2 (2017): 121, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/cqw090>.

³⁷ Malm, 124.

Central Themes of Iranian Petrofiction

This study will analyze eleven Iranian petrofictions, including novels, novellas, and short stories, written between the 1940s and the 2010s, which, besides reflecting on some of the themes from global petrofiction listed above, share a theoretical engagement with concepts of national allegories, center and periphery, and gender relations. In this section, I will outline these concepts and explain their relevance to Iranian petrofiction.

1. National Allegories

In 1986, the cultural critic Frederic Jameson published what became an influential and controversial article: “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.”³⁸ There, Jameson argues that all texts produced in the “third world” are allegorical and should be regarded as “national allegories,” particularly when “their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel.”³⁹ Jameson believes that, in the “third world,” “the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.”⁴⁰ Acknowledging that the literature of the so-called “third world” is neglected by the people who formed the values and stereotypes of “first-world” culture, Jameson asserts that the main cultural characteristic of the “third world” is that “none of these cultures can be conceived as anthropologically independent or autonomous, rather, they are all in various distinct ways locked in a life-and-death struggle with first-world cultural imperialism—a cultural struggle that is itself a reflexion of the economic situation of such areas...”⁴¹ Although Jameson’s examples are mostly from African countries and China, he believes that, in general, the position of the writer in the “third world” as an intellectual is always “in one way or another political.”⁴²

Many post-colonial critics, such as Aijaz Ahmad, disagree with Jameson’s ideas. Ahmad argues that Jameson was generalizing when he made such a rigid distinction between literature of the “first” and the “third” world. In “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory,’” he contends that Jameson positions himself and the Western world as a “civilized other” opposed to an “uncivilized” rest of the world. According to Ahmad, “there [is] no such thing as ‘third world literature’ which can be constructed as an internally coherent

³⁸ Frederic Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” *Social Text*, no. 15 (1986): 65–88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466493>.

³⁹ Jameson, 69.

⁴⁰ Jameson, 69.

⁴¹ Jameson, 68.

⁴² Jameson, 74.

object of theoretical knowledge”⁴³ because of fundamental issues with Jameson’s periodization and his disregard of different social and linguistic formations. He insists that Jameson’s point of view ignores the vast majority of literary productions in Asia and Africa, which do not fit into his category of “national allegory.”⁴⁴ Jameson’s interpretation has been criticized as too generalizing not just with regard to the “third world,” but also the “first world.”⁴⁵ Just as not all literature of the “third world” is allegorical, not all literature of the “first world” is free from allegorical forms of socio-political commentary.

Although I agree that Jameson’s concept of national allegory should not be generalized, I contend that it can be useful for understanding Iranian petrofiction. In “Who Is Afraid of National Allegories?,” Imre Szeman writes that Jameson’s “national allegory” is an “influential and important attempt to theorize the relationship of literary production to the nation and to politics.”⁴⁶ National allegories, according to Szeman, are a type of narrative whose essential subject is the nation-state. He explains that Jameson’s notion is based on the idea that in the so-called “first world” there is a strict distinction between the public and the private, and that the literature produced in the first world therefore belongs primarily to the realm of the private, representing individual stories, tastes, and fates.

According to Szeman, the interpretation of third world literature as national allegories can be read in a non-orientalist way through Jameson’s notion of “cultural revolution,” defined as “subalternity” in Antonio Gramsci’s work. Szeman believes that the link between “cultural revolution” and “subalternity” in Jameson’s work captures “the feeling of mental inferiority” and the “habits of subservience and obedience” which emerge primarily in the special relationship between colonizers and the colonized, and can also be found in representations of colonized people.⁴⁷ He writes:

So, the concept of national allegory points to the ways in which the psychological points to the political, and the trauma of subalternity finds itself “projected outwards” (allegorically) into the “cultural.” Very crudely, the cultural is what lies “between” the psychological and the political, unifying “theory and practice” in such a way that it is *only* there that the “baleful and crippling” habits that are the residue of colonialism can be addressed and potentially overcome.⁴⁸

⁴³ Aijaz Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory,’” In *Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (Verso, 1994), 96.

⁴⁴ Ahmad, 97.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, Michael Sprinker, “The National Question: Said, Ahmad, Jameson,” *Public Culture* 6 (1993): 3-29.

⁴⁶ Imre Szeman, “Who’s Afraid of National Allegory? Jameson, Literary Criticism, Globalization,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100, no. 3 (2001): 803, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-100-3-803>.

⁴⁷ Szeman, 803.

⁴⁸ Szeman, 810.

With this explanation, Szeman opens up the definition of national allegory by pointing out that it is in the realm of the cultural, which includes the literary, that the psychological effects of colonialism can be traced back to its workings as a political system, and that this system and the habits of subjection it produces in colonized subjects can be rejected. As Szeman aptly points out, “the political and the trauma” of subalternity “find themselves projected outward (allegorically) into the ‘cultural.’”⁴⁹ Thus, writing national allegories was not an unconscious or unintended outcome, nor was it the only possible way to write for authors in (ex-)colonies; rather, it marks a choice and a conscious commitment to narrating the fate of their society and, indeed, their nation in a way that draws attention to the political, social, and psychological effects of colonialism.

As noted, I consider the notion of the national allegory important for understanding Iranian petrofiction. The petroleum industry in Iran created material and social infrastructures that, more than anything else, blurred the borders between private and public, linking the fate of the individual to that of the Iranian nation-state as it negotiated the encounter with foreign powers as well as domestic conflicts. Petrofiction mediates and exposes the connection between the individual psychologies shaped in the oil encounter as a political, social, and economic structure that prompted particular collective identities and imaginaries of the Iranian nation. Following Szeman, this study analyzes different literary representations of the Iranian oil encounter as strategically presenting a cultural critique in the form of national allegory.

Considering Iranian petrofiction as presenting national allegories allows us to place it in a category that is neither that of postcolonial literature, nor that of orientalism. Rather, Iranian petroleum fiction, as I will explain in the first chapter, is part of the category of modern Iranian literature called “committed literature.”⁵⁰ It is neither about the “writing back” of people who have just emerged from colonialism and are trying to forge an independent image of themselves, nor does it repeat the way Eurocentric orientalists rendered “the east” as exotic, backwards, and uncivilized.⁵¹ Instead, Iranian petrofiction engages, often through national

⁴⁹ Szeman, 810.

⁵⁰ “Committed literature” is the English translation of *Adabiat Mote ‘ahed’*, on which I will expand in the first chapter.

⁵¹ I took the term “writing back” from the title of the book *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literature*. The notion of “writing back” was established by the authors of this book, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, as a main characteristic of postcolonial literature, which saw writers such as Jean Rhys, J.M. Coetzee, and Peter Carey write stories to answer the canon from a post-colonial point of view. See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (Routledge, 2003). The notion of orientalists constructing “the east” as exotic is taken from Edward Said’s seminal book *Orientalism*. See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 1st Vintage Books ed edition (Vintage, 1979).

allegory, a situation in which the writer, and the text, are situated in a semi-colonial “in-between.”

2. *Center and Periphery*

Oil divides, transforms, and connects spaces, and it does so in unequal ways, thus creating center and periphery relations, not only internationally through semi-colonialism, but also nationally. Center and periphery also have a dynamic, perspectival existence; as is written in the introduction of *Peripheral Visions in the Globalizing Present*, a particular place can be peripheral at one scale and central at another, peripheral from one point of view and central from another.⁵²

In Iran, the oil industry developed in Khuzestan province and transformed rural places, such as Abadan, Masjed-e Soleyman, and Gachsaran, as well as small towns such as Ahwaz, into important urban centers. Khuzestan province has been the center of Iran’s oil industry since oil was first discovered, but this only gave a different form to its status as a periphery within Iran, as oil industry policies were still made in the center, in Tehran. Khuzestan produced oil to be consumed in Tehran and other large cities, and technicians and managers often came from the center as well. Khuzestan had been a region of villages, small towns, and nomads (Bakhtiyaris and Bedouins), but after 1908, oil wells started to mushroom, pipelines crossed the region to bring oil to the ports of the Persian Gulf and the cities of the north, and communication towers, refineries, and company towns were built. In this process, farmers and nomads lost most of their land, and people from neighboring regions started to migrate to Khuzestan to find work in the oil industry.⁵³

The settings of the petrofictions that will be analyzed in this study are filled with the industrial imagery of oil fields, refineries, and company towns, and with the sight and smell of oil, which is seen to bring national and international developments into a peripheral region, radically changing its appearance. While at one point, Khuzestan could be considered a periphery to Tehran, the capital and center of the country, at another point, it became the central point of modernization and globalization in Iran, and in the Middle East as a whole. In the chapters that follow, I will examine how different Iranian authors represent these changing

⁵² Esther Peeren, Hanneke Stuit, and Astrid Van Weyenberg, *Peripheral Visions in the Globalizing Present: Space, Mobility, Aesthetics* (Brill, 2016), 3.

⁵³ On the development of the oil industry in Khuzestan, see Kaveh Ehsani’s chapter “Oil, State, and Society in Iran in the aftermath of WWI” in Thomas Fraser, ed., *The First World War and its Aftermath: The Shaping of the Middle East* (Ginko Library Press, 2015): 191-212. See also Kaveh Ehsani, “The Social History of Labor in the Iranian Oil Industry: The Built Environment and the Making of the Industrial Working Class (1908-1941)” (PhD dissertation, Faculty of the Humanities, Leiden University, 2014).

center-periphery relations, in particular the dilemmas of the farmers and pastoral workers whose lives were overturned by the sudden appearance of a large industry with company towns, and the complex ways in which their new identities as citizens and workers, urban dwellers, and the poor were constructed.

3. *Gender Relations*

Most studies about the relation between women and petroleum culture are about women living in the US and the masculine characteristic of petroleum society in that country. Scholars such as Sheena Wilson and Cara Daggett refer to the “petro-masculine” environment of the 20th and 21st century US. They believe that, while fossil energy helped promote gender equality at one point, it also supported the masculine characteristics of American society. In describing the connection between fossil fuels and masculinity, Daggett notes that through the concept of petro-masculinity she is trying to “emphasise the relationship - both technically and affectively, ideationally and materially - between fossil fuels and a white patriarchal order.”⁵⁴ She believes that “petro-masculinity approaches masculinity as a socially constructed identity,”⁵⁵ arguing that masculinity operates in opposition to femininity, thus reproducing the unequal power relations between men and women. Daggett adds that petro-masculinity shares its characteristics with traditional concepts of masculinity, “but at the same time, its appearance in the American far-right today is better understood as a kind of hypermasculinity, which is a more reactionary stance.”⁵⁶

Apart from studies on the masculine characteristics of American petroleum culture, there are a small number of studies on the relation between women and petroleum culture in the Middle East. Even these few studies, however, appear trapped in an orientalist point of view. They fall into the trap of affirming the triangle of Islam, oil, and women, blaming either Islam or oil, or both, for the supposed backwardness of women in the Middle East. While L. Ross, in his article “Oil, Islam, and Women,” argues that “women in the Middle East are underrepresented in the workforce and in government because of oil--not Islam,”⁵⁷ Nawal Saadawi blames both Islam and oil for the repression of women in the Middle East. I believe that all these points of view are guilty of generalizing, as they wrongly consider all women of the Middle East as Muslim and all Muslim women as repressed.

⁵⁴ Cara Daggett, “Petro-Masculinity: Fossil Fuels and Authoritarian Desire,” *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 47, no. 1 (2018): 28, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829818775817>.

⁵⁵ Daggett, 33.

⁵⁶ Daggett, 33.

⁵⁷ Michael L. Ross, “Oil, Islam, and Women,” *The American Political Science Review* 102, no. 1 (2008): 107.

In this study, I will focus on how the encounter of women and petroleum culture is reflected upon in Iranian literature. I argue that the texts I analyze show that while petroleum modernity should be considered as the main catalyst for women's emancipation in Iran, it is also the main reason why this process remained stagnant for such a long time. The transformation of the position of Iranian women throughout the years of petroleum modernity will be analyzed by looking specifically at a novel about a woman living in the company district of Bowardah in Abadan. *Things We Left Unsaid* (2001), written by Zoya Pirzad, centers on a woman married to a high-ranked oil worker who lives in a company district. In my analysis of this novel, I will analyze its evocation of the archetype of the "wife of oil," introduced by Nawal Al-Saadawi in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* and extended to the women who experience the petroleum encounter on third-world oil frontiers by Sharae Deckard in her article "Gendering Petrofiction: Energy, Imperialism and Social Reproduction."⁵⁸

By juxtaposing Pirzad's novel with various stories and novels featuring women living outside of the company districts, this study reveals the impact of petroleum on the lives of women on two different sides of the walls of petroleum modernity. They make clear that the degree of women's emancipation, the roles they can play in Iranian society, and all that they can achieve or have lost in the new world of oil modernity, is dependent on which side of the wall they live on. I will argue that the relation between women and petroleum in Iranian petrofiction is mediated by the semi- and neo-colonial characteristic of the oil companies in Iran, which produce a highly politically segregated, profit-driven society in which women have more limited options for rebellion than men.

Research Questions and Chapter Outline

In this study, I will focus not only on how the encounter with the petroleum industry is represented in the specific petrofictions I analyze, but also on how petroleum modernity aided the rise and flourishing of modern prose fiction in Iran. The research questions central to my analysis in the following chapters are:

- What are the main characteristics of Iranian petroleum fiction and its representation of the oil encounter in Iran?

⁵⁸ Nawal El Saadawi, *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* (Saqi Books, 2001). Sharae Deckard, "Gendering Petrofiction: Energy, Imperialism and Social Reproduction," in *Oil Fiction: World Literature and Our Contemporary Petrosphere*, edited by Stacy Balkan and Swaralipi Nandi (Pennsylvania State University Press, Forthcoming). Accessed February 20, 2019 via Academia.edu.

- What kind of imageries, symbols, and narratives are used to represent the oil encounter in Iran, and how does Iranian petrofiction tell the history of the construction of new national, ethnic, gender, class, and political identities in the context of petro-modernity?
- Finally, how did petroleum modernity help modern Iranian writers, poets, translators, and filmmakers to emerge, and with what literary developments is Iranian petrofiction associated?

The first chapter of this study focuses on the connection between the growth of modern Iranian literature and petroleum modernity in Iran. It gives an historical overview of modern Persian literature from the early 20th century to the present. Historians of modern Iranian literature generally consider two historical events as marking the beginning of modern Iranian literature: the constitutional revolution of 1905-1911 and Reza Shah Pahlavi's coup d'état of 1921. Although the discovery of petroleum in the hillsides of northern Khuzestan in 1908 has never been mentioned in this context, I will take it as an alternative starting point, arguing that modern Iranian literature was influenced by petroleum modernity as much as by the revolution and coup.

The second chapter traces the early appearances of petroleum in modern Persian literature. Called "The Era of Petroleum Consciousness," this chapter demonstrates how Iranians, including writers, became cognizant of the importance of petroleum to local and international relations. It focuses on early literary representations of petroleum and how these representations reflected the reactions of notable intellectuals to the semi-colonial characteristics of the oil industry in Iran. The chapter focuses on two odes by Mohammed Taqi Bahar, *Masjed Soleyman* (1927) and *Curse to the British* (Post WWII), Sadeq Hedayat's story "The Case of the Anti-Christ's Donkey" (1944), and Jalal Al-e Ahmad's novella *The Tale of the Beehives* (1954).

The representation of nationalist and leftist activists in Iranian petrofiction is the main focus of the third chapter. I call the period from the 1950s to the 1970s "The Era of the Struggle for Oil Nationalization." This era saw a great expansion of committed literature reflecting on this struggle in the form of national allegory. The growth of anti-imperialist and anti-foreigner sentiments in oil regions and the locals' transformation into political activists are the main foci of the petrofiction of this period. The chapter focuses on "The Little Native Boy" (1971), "Our Small Town" (1971) and *The Neighbors* (1974) by Ahmad Mahmoud; "Aushur in Autumn" and "The Summer of That Year" (1969) by Naser Taqvayi; and "Siasanbu" and "Akusia" (1979) by Mohammad Reza Safdari.

Petroleum modernity has also been very influential in modern Iranian cinema. This impact can be studied in different periods, of which the most important one is that of the petroleum boom of the 1970s, which led to significant financial and cultural growth in the country. Chapter 4 will discuss the Golestan Film Workshop and its influence on the emergence of the southern school of Iranian literature. The chapter focuses on the critical observations of Ebrahim Golestan, a prominent writer and filmmaker, on the modernization efforts of the Pahlavi family, who are portrayed spending their extravagant petroleum earnings in two of his documentaries, *The Fire* and *The Wave, Coral, and Rock* (1958-1961), and in his last film, *The Secret of the Treasure at Ghost Valley* (1979).

Chapter 5 will discuss the influence of forced modernization and the magical aspects of petroleum modernity by looking at Moniru Ravinapour's novel *Drowned* (1989), which tells the story of the transformation of the remote village of Jofreh by the arrival of the oil industry. Ravinapour's novel uses the genre of magical realism to tell this story, underscoring how this genre is used across less developed petrostates to emphasize the ungraspable, radically transformative force of the global oil industry and the false promises it conjures.

In Chapter 6, I will discuss the appearance of the archetype of the "wife of oil," introduced by Naval al-Saadawi, in Zoya Pirzad's 2001 novel *Things We Left Unsaid*, which acquaints us with the city of Abadan during its most prosperous years of petroleum boom in 1970s through the eyes of an unhappy housewife living in one of the company districts. My analysis of the novel will show how it pinpoints the perception of the oil industry and petroleum modernity as masculine as one of the reasons for women's subordination in petrostates. Pirzad's novel is one of the most-read Iranian novels of the last three decades and well known for inducing nostalgic feelings about the pre-Revolution era. My reading of it as a petrofiction shows that there is a critical aspect to the novel that counters this nostalgic surface.

Chapter 7, finally, traces the spectral presence of petroleum modernity in the city of Masjed Soleyman as it is portrayed in *Songs of the Dead* (2014), written by Farhad Keshvari, and in a number of photographs on display at the Petroleum Museum of Iran. I argue that Keshvari's novel portrays the first encounter between members of the Bakhtiyari tribe and the oil industry in the mountainous city of Masjed Soleyman as a traumatic or failed experience in Ernst van Alphen's sense. The main issue I deal with in this chapter is the delay in representing the early encounter of the locals with the oil industry, which made its appearance in Iranian petrofiction much later than the stories of the rise of petroleum cities such as Abadan and Ahwaz.

The conclusion to this study reviews the main findings of the chapters and answers the research questions. Building on Imre Szeman and the Petrocultures Research Group's *After Oil* (2016), it underlines the need for work in the energy humanities on Iran, past and present, and tries to imagine the possibility of a post-petroleum Iran.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Imre Szeman and the Petrocultures Research Group, *After Oil* (Petrocultures Research Group, 2016).