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Crude oil and its false promises of modernization

Petroleum encounters in modern Iranian fiction

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Chapter 1

Iranian History, Modern Persian Literature, and the Oil Encounter

During the early 20th century, while people in the center of Iran were busy fighting for liberty and democracy, the Australian capitalist William D’Arcy was using his considerable fortune in an attempt to uncover oil in Western Iran. Whereas D’Arcy himself never set foot on Iranian soil, his team spent seven exhausting years in the remote and mountainous region of Zagros. Finally, as the company teetered on the verge of bankruptcy, the team discovered oil in Masjed Suleiman on the eve of 28 May 1908. The head of the team, George Bernard Reynolds, telegrammed D’Arcy and five days later D’Arcy received the good news. “If it is true, all our troubles are over,” he beamed, according to the BP website’s account of the company’s history, adding, “I am telling no one about it until I have the news confirmed.”⁶⁰ After years of fruitless searching, the black gold of the Middle East finally spouted into the air: “the smell was unmistakable. It was a smell you could see. The vapors rose clearly in the sunlight, and stank of rotten eggs.”⁶¹ To Reynolds, though, it was the best thing he had smelled in seven years. He instructed the men to keep drilling.

In 1909, one year after the original discovery, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company known as APOC was established. This development was, according to Touraj Atabaki, the beginning of an attempt to “monopolize the extraction, production, and marketing of Persian oil.”⁶² APOC, or BP plc as it is known today, initially consisted of a group of less than twelve researchers, but went on to become an affluent company providing petrol to the people of London and Glasgow.⁶³ Although Iran has a long history of relations with the West, the beginning of the story of modern Iran coincides with the discovery of petroleum by D’Arcy and his team. Not only did this discovery change the destiny of both Iran and Britain, but it eventually impacted the whole world. As Atabaki notes, Iran’s oil greatly aided the British

⁶⁰ “First Oil – 1901-1908 | Our History | Who We Are | BP,” bp.com, accessed October 20, 2018, <https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/who-we-are/our-history/first-oil.html>.

⁶¹ “First Oil – 1901-1908 | Our History | Who We Are | BP.”

⁶² Touraj Atabaki, “From ‘Amaleh (Labor) to Kargar (Worker): Recruitment, Work Discipline and Making of the Working Class in the Persian/Iranian Oil Industry,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 84 (2013): 162.

⁶³ “First Oil – 1901-1908 | Our History | Who We Are | BP.”

forces in the WWI and helped Iran achieve considerable political and cultural development whilst simultaneously subjecting it to economic and social semi-colonialism.

Modern Iranian literature and petroleum were introduced to Iranians almost at the same time. In fact, the histories of modern Persian literature and petroleum discovery are so connected that talking about one while ignoring the other is not possible. It was with the arrival of an industry as huge as the oil industry that all of Iran became familiar with the foundations and characteristic of modern life, and it was in literary texts that this experience of becoming acquainted with modernity was worked through.

This chapter specifies the connection between the process of petroleum industrialization and the emergence of modern Iranian literature.⁶⁴ I will show how the development of modern Iranian literature ran parallel to the growth of industrialization and modernization enabled by petroleum. To this end, I mobilize Kamran Talattof's episodic account of the successive literary movements of modern Iranian literature, linking each movement to the political and social characteristic of the time. Since my main concern is with the influence on literature of the development of the petroleum industry and the policies around it, each episode distinguished by Talattof is linked to the impact of the petroleum encounter in a particular period. First, I will discuss the era of petroleum consciousness, which runs from 1908 till the 1953 coup d'état, and is important because it is the period in which Iranian literary communities become familiar with petroleum both as a substance and a source of revenue. Second, I will talk about the impact on modern Iranian literature of the period starting with the 1953 coup d'état until the Iranian Revolution in 1979, characterized by struggles around oil nationalization. Third, I will write about the Iranian Revolution, the beginning of the Iran-Iran war and the international sanctions on the petroleum industry, and how these developments influenced Iranian literature. The final section is on the flourishing of Iranian women's literature and the way this literature has reflected on the petroleum encounter. The discussion in each section has three foci: the political circumstances, the developments surrounding petroleum, and the literary movements involved.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ The account of the modern history and literature of Iran presented in this chapter primarily relies on Ervand Abrahamian's books on the history of modern Iran, which are among the least controversial and most reliable, and Kamran Talattof's book on the politics of modern Persian literature. I also use Talattof's classification of the historiography, which I believe provides the best way to chart the major changes that occurred in the modern literature of Iran in over its first one hundred years.

⁶⁵ The Iranian oil industry had different names over the years. In its early days, around 1908, it functioned without a name. Then came the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), established as a subsidiary of the Burma Oil Company. In 1935, it became the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company; and in 1948, it reestablished itself as the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC). Under the Consortium Agreement of 1954, it was denationalized. Nevertheless, to this day, Iran's oil industry is referred to as NIOC.

The Era of Petroleum Consciousness

I will call the period between the discovery of Iranian oil in 1908 and the 1953 coup d'état the "Era of Petroleum Consciousness." By this, I mean that this was an era in which petroleum as a substance and a source of revenue became familiar to Iranians, including intellectuals who started reflecting on its importance in their life and in Iranian society and politics. The establishment of the oil industry in the south of Iran in the early 20th century was the beginning of a history of disturbance in the Middle East, or, as Hamid Dabashi puts it, the start of the unofficial European colonization of the region.⁶⁶ In his article "From 'Amaleh (Labor) to Kargar (Worker): Recruitment, Work Discipline and Making of the Working Class in the Persian/Iranian Oil Industry," Atabaki mentions that the discovery of oil "opened a new chapter in Iran's labor history."⁶⁷ He is referring to the massive labor recruitment campaign that was set up in Khuzestan province and to the difficulties APOC faced in trying to establish and develop the oil industry. The company grew very fast, making high labor demands unavoidable. After the establishment of an oil refinery in the city of Abadan, the company experienced success and began to take control of the oil fields in Khuzestan province. During this time, Iran was experiencing the last decades of the Qajar dynasty (1779-1925) and the first Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1953). However, the most important historical incident of the beginning of the century was the constitutional revolution (1905-1911).

According to Abrahamian's *A History of Modern Iran*, the constitutional revolution has its roots in the 19th century. The revolutionaries were demanding justice from the state and were asking for the establishment of a parliament (*edalatkhani*). They also demanded reforms to the traditional aspects of Iranian society. According to Abrahamian, the revolution had two strands: on the one hand, "it introduced a mutual threat to the many dispersed urban bazaars and religious notables, bringing together a cross-regional middle class," and, on the other hand, "the contact with the West, especially through modern education, introduced new ideas, new occupations, and eventually a new middle class."⁶⁸

The revolutionaries had many demands, the earliest of which was reforms in all affairs [of the state]. This was followed by a demand for the establishment of an office of justice later called the Council of Justice (*Majles-e 'adalat*). The constitution was signed by Mozaffar ad-Din Shah Qajar in 1906, but abolished in 1908 by his successor Mohammad Ali Shah.

⁶⁶ Hamid Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted* (New Press, 2008), 58.

⁶⁷ Atabaki, "From 'Amaleh (Labor) to Kargar (Worker)," 159.

⁶⁸ Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 36.

Abrahamian argues that “the constitutionalists suffered a major setback in 1907 with the signing of the Anglo-Russian Convention.”⁶⁹ This convention divided Iran into three zones, allocating the north to Russia, the southwest to Britain, and making the rest of the country neutral territory.

Reza Shah Pahlavi gained power in 1921, when the British and the Russians occupied almost the whole country. He reformed the political system, exerted power over the parliament, established various ministries, spied on people, and did not have any tolerance for disagreement. He altered social norms in the country by, among other things, making family names mandatory, introducing identification cards, altering the dress code to the Western style, and launching radio. Furthermore, he improved the infrastructure by connecting different parts of the country through roads and railways, modernized the education system, and made Persian the official national language. With regard to the language, he promoted a simplified version that did not use as many Arabic terms. Although Reza Shah is known as the king of modernization, Abrahamian contends that “his main aim in establishing new institutions was to expand his control by expanding his state’s power into all sectors of the country.”⁷⁰

In 1921, Reza Shah Pahlavi staged a coup d’état, taking control of the whole country in 1925 by announcing his coronation. As noted, his policies centered on achieving the full-scale modernization of Iran. He praised the Western lifestyle and denounced the backwardness of Iran. He commanded the unveiling of women (*Kashf-e Hijab*) and approved reformation laws such as forcing men to wear European Bowler hats and forcing nomads to adopt a sedentary life instead of migrating seasonally. In addition, for the first time in the history of Iran, Reza Shah established a very powerful army, using oil royalties and the newly implemented tax system. His emphasis was on forging nationalism through opposing Iranian Persians to Arabs and the pre-history of Iran to Islamic history.

The beginning of the Pahlavi dynasty spurred dramatic change in Iran. In Khuzestan, the empowerment of Reza Shah caused problems for APOC and Sheikh Khaz‘al, the mayor of the province. Khaz‘al had made agreements with APOC (which had been renewed from 1903 to 1914), allowing the company to operate in Khuzestan, while he governed the province and collected the taxes. Reza Shah, who was dreaming of unifying the country, sent military groups to Khuzestan in July 1922, which were attacked by the Bakhtiyari tribes who lived in the northern lands of Khuzestan. Bakhtoyaries demanded that Reza Shah inform them about his

⁶⁹ Abrahamian, 42.

⁷⁰ Abrahamian, 72.

plans for the area. After further military attacks, Khaz'al took refuge with the British, only to have the British take Reza Shah's side. According to Steven R. Ward, Khaz'al disbanded his Arab forces and retired to Muhammarah. Following the conflict, however, "Sheikh Khaz'al and his son were captured and sent to Tehran, where they were kept under house arrest for eleven years."⁷¹ This act cemented Reza Shah's power in the region and, according to Kaveh Ehsani, allowed APOC to gain full control of Khuzestan, while also rendering it "for the first time directly subject to the authority of the central government."⁷² This resulted in the company's adoption of a different position towards Iranians, whose support APOC now felt it needed to secure. It did this through becoming "engaged in a widening web of social projects, ranging from education to sanitation, housing, and municipal reform, that were part of a protracted process of transformative social engineering with profound, and indeed revolutionary consequences for local society in Khuzestan."⁷³ These social reforms constituted the initial steps towards establishing the oil company towns of Masjed Soleyman and Abadan, the literary representation of which I will study in Chapter 6 and 7.

Those opposed to Reza Shah called his plans "Westernization"; they fueled a leftist movement in Iran that would become, as Abrahamian notes, the first real challenge to the Pahlavi dynasty. Within a month of Reza Shah's coronation, a group of recent graduates from European universities and former political prisoners led by Iraj Eskandari met in the home of his uncle Sulayman Iskandari, the veteran constitutional revolutionary, and announced the formation of the Tudeh Party. This party was influenced by anti-despotic and anti-imperial actions that were fashionable around the world at the beginning of the 20th century. The founders had been nationalists during the constitutional revolution of 1905-1911 and their primary aim was "to create a broad-based organization that would appeal to socialistic, patriotic, democratic, and even constitutionalist sentiments."⁷⁴ Iraj Eskandari remained the chairman of the Tudeh Party until 1944.

In 1933, the Iranian government signed a new agreement with the British according to which APOC (Anglo-Persian Oil Company) was renamed AIOC (Anglo-Iranian Oil Company), because Reza Shah wanted other countries to call Persia Iran. In addition, AIOC promised to recruit more Iranian workers. According to Jefroudi, the 1930s were years of rapid

⁷¹ Steven R. Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces* (Georgetown University Press, 2009), 139.

⁷² 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, Leiden University, 2014), 90.

⁷³ Ehsani, "The Social History of Labor in the Iranian Oil Industry," 100.

⁷⁴ Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 72.

development for Iran: “The trans-Iran railroad was opened in 1938, 265 new factories operated both by private and public sectors and employing forty-seven thousand workers were founded between 1930-1940, and hospitals and clinics were established in the capital and major big cities.”⁷⁵ Jefroudi, however, also emphasizes that these developments were not funded by rising oil revenues but by taxes, “as oil revenues were not a part of the national budget, and were deposited in the state reserved fund used for military imports until September 1941.”⁷⁶

In August 1941, the allies invaded Iran and occupied it, the Soviet Union from the north and Britain from the south. This occupation fueled nationalist sentiments in Iran. In the same year, Reza Shah Pahlavi was forced to abdicate in favor of his son Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. According to Abrahamian, it was the “Anglo-Soviet invasion [which] destroyed Reza Shah- but not the Pahlavi state.”⁷⁷ The WWII years, moreover, saw a change in the public opinion about the oil industry in Iran. According to Jefroudi, “the Iranian uneasiness with the British monopoly on Iranian oil was further strengthened by other countries’ increased interest in getting concessions from Iran towards the end of the war.”⁷⁸ Among the countries interested in Iran’s oil were the Netherlands (Royal Dutch Shell) and the US (Standard Vacuum Oil Company).

From the time of Reza Shah’s abdication till the 1953 coup d’état, two political parties were active: the nationalist party, led by the prime minister of Iran, Mohammad Mossadeq (1882-1967), and the leftist Tudeh Party. Both parties supported the idea of nationalizing oil, and the government tried hard to alter the existing agreement with AIOC in favor of Iran. The 1933 agreement, mentioned above, heralded the beginning of the nationalization of the oil industry. Significantly, at this time the nationalization and de-colonization of oil revenues was also on the agenda in other countries, such as Venezuela, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. During WWII, the global importance of oil became even more evident to the Iranian government as oil was extracted from Iran’s soil and exported overseas. In the post-war years, according to Abrahamian, the decline of the Tudeh Party prompted the emergence of a nationalist movement, led by Mohammad Mossadeq, who became prime minister in April 1951.⁷⁹ Mossadeq, who was from the Qajar family, was a member of parliament before becoming prime minister, and during his years of service in parliament he was instrumental in moving

⁷⁵ Maral Jefroudi, “‘If I Deserve It, It Should Be Paid to Me’: A Social History of Labour in the Iranian Oil Industry 1951-1971” (PhD dissertation, Leiden University, 2017), 49.

⁷⁶ Jefroudi, 49.

⁷⁷ Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 97.

⁷⁸ Jefroudi, 53.

⁷⁹ Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 114.

towards the nationalization of AIOC. He campaigned against the British and the Shah, and created the National Front Party (*Jebehe-ye Melli*). With the support of some members of parliament, Ayatollah Sayyed Abdul-Qassem Kashani, the Bazaar, and middle-class citizens, Mossadeq continued to demand the nationalization of the oil industry of Iran as prime minister.

The nationalization law was registered and signed in May 1951, but the oil industry was de-nationalized again by the 1953 coup d'état. The years in-between are known as the years of Blockade. Nationalization ended British control over AIOC and the top managerial functions were filled by Iranians.⁸⁰ However, "with the departure of the British staff and the following removal of tankers from Abadan, the storage capacity of the refinery came to its limit in no time, hindering production further, and Iran was not able to sell this oil as the British claimed to own it."⁸¹ Before the coup d'état, therefore, selling oil had become a huge problem for Iran.

Classic Persian literature, which is written and recited in the new Persian language or "Parsi Dari," emerged in the 10th century with the work of the poet Ferdowsi Tusi. This literature is known around the world for its form, its dedicated educational content, and its historical references to events that happened on Iran's plateau, ranging from the borders of China and India in the east to the Mediterranean shores in the west. Until the 20th century, Persian literature comprised many forms, such as epics, ghazals, panegyrics, and couplets in poetry. The poetry borrowed some prosody from classic Arabic poetry and added its Persian taste and thoughts, creating unforgettable musical rhymes and patterns. In prose, Persian literature consisted mainly of historical texts and the memoirs of men in power. The peak period of Persian literature occurred in the era of Mohammad Rumi in the 13th century and the time of Shams Aldin Muhammad Hafiz in the 14th century. After these masters, Persian literature experienced a decline till the time of the Qajars between the 17th and 20th century.

During the rule of the Qajar dynasty, writers and poets were pre-occupied with imitating the classic form and contents of early Persian poets such as Farrokhi Sistani, the famous poet of the 11th century, and Khaqani, who lived in the 12th century. In the period known as the time of "return," Persian poets were trying to return to the time when Persian literature was experiencing its most prosperous time. However, the form and contents of the poetry written contrasted deeply with what society expected from literature in the 18th and 19th century. Towards the end of the 19th century, secular and modernist ideas came to occupy the mind of

⁸⁰ Jefroudi, 73.

⁸¹ Jefroudi, 74.

reformists, who did not want the weak Qajars to be in charge of the country anymore. The reformists were unhappy about the loss of territories in north-west Iran to the Russians, unending wars and tensions with the Ottomans in the west, and what they saw as the country's cultural backwardness. Given the changes and reforms taking place elsewhere in the world, they questioned the Qajars' sovereign authority and strove for a secular and parliamentary government, as noted earlier.

The poets among the reformers were looking for a language close to the language of ordinary people and a form that would be easier for the majority of people to understand. They felt that the classic forms of Persian literature and this literature's language, which was full of Arabic words and Quranic references, did not fit modern ideas such as the need for a new legal system, education, and women's emancipation, and that more appealing forms were needed. They wanted their works to be rooted in the European secular and progressive tradition and not in the Islamic and Arabic one.

The enlightenment of the people was the main purpose of constitutional literature. Revolutionary ideas, which could not be disseminated effectively in the dry, to-the-point language of politics, were recited in the form of poetry and appeared in newspaper columns as fables, stories, or memoirs. Literary figures such as Iraj Mirza (1874-1935), Mohammad Taghi Bahar (1886-1951), and Mirzade Eshghi (1893-1924) were among the revolutionary literary figures who believed that classic Persian literature was unable to embrace new ideas and content, and sought a new form and language through which to communicate their ideas. Indeed, Talattof, in *The Politics of Persian Writing*, refers to this era as one of "Persianism,"⁸² by which he means that it was a time in which the so-called "modernists" tried to support the constitutional revolution by using the Persian language in literary works that did not resemble classic ones. According to Talattof, the literary works of this era "reflected upon and deeply criticized many aspects of Iranian national characteristics, including social life and traditional culture but excluding the Persian language."⁸³

In the debate between modernists and traditionalists, the word "modern" was used to refer to any literary form that did not resemble classic Persian literature in form or content. During the constitutional revolution, literature and politics became closely intertwined, as literature was the main medium used to convey revolutionary messages to the people. Talattof refers to the increase in the number of literary journals that covered the debate between

⁸² Kamran Talattof, *The Politics of Writing in Iran: A History of Modern Persian Literature* (Syracuse University Press, 2000), 25.

⁸³ Talattof, 25.

traditionalist and modernists.⁸⁴ WWI and the institution of the Pahlavi dynasty decided the debate in favor of the modernists.

One of the modernist writers trying to find a new form for his literary thoughts in the early 20th century was Ali Esfandiari, known as Nima Yushij (1897-1960). Renowned for working in the old forms of the ghazal and ode, in the tradition of Saadi and Hafez, he also developed a new form of poetry later called the “Nimayi style.” This style involved a change in the rhythm of his poems and changes in the lines that reflected changes in meaning. While before, all the hemistich of the ghazal had a similar length, in the Nimayi style lines could be shorter or longer, reflecting the thoughts of the poet.

While classic Persian literature featured anecdotes presented as short stories among its educational and descriptive texts, in 1921, Mohammad Ali Jamalzade (1892-1997) published the first collection of short stories, called *Once Upon A Time*, in Berlin. With this publication, Iran, which just had entered a new political era with the establishment of the constitutional monarchy, also entered the world of modern literature. Less than a year later, in May 1922, Nima Yushij (1897-1960) wrote “Afsane” (“Myth”), the first modern Persian poem. Two years later, in 1924, *Readed Tehran (Tehran Makhoof)*, written by Moshfeq Kazemi (1902-1977), was published in Berlin, a work held to be the first modern Persian novel.⁸⁵ While this decade is considered a crucial one in the history of modern Persian literature, in the following years prose writers and poets were still practicing their pen in the craft of modern literature, trying to find the proper language and content. The most prominent literary figures of this era were Mohammad Taqi Bahar, Nima Yushij, Sadeq Hedayat (1903-1955), and Jalal Al-e Ahmad. Except for Nima Yushij, these are the writers which will be discussed in the second chapter with regard to how they conveyed their ideas about Iran’s petroleum modernity in their work.

In the following section, I turn to the second period I have distinguished, in order to describe how Iranian writers, after the 1953 coup d’état, became committed to representing the petroleum problem that dominated Iranian politics as the struggles over oil nationalization continued and the central state imposed a forced modernization process.

⁸⁴ Talattof, *The Politics of Writing in Iran*, 22.

⁸⁵ Hasan Mir‘abedini, “Moshfeq-e Kazemi, Sayyed Morteza – Encyclopaedia Iranica,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, accessed October 29, 2018, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/moshfeq-kazemi>.

The 1953 Coup d'État and the Era of Petroleum Struggle

In response to the end of British influence in Khuzestan, Britain blocked Iran's oil and forced other countries to end their agreements to buy Iranian oil. According to Jefroudi, "Iran turned to the countries that she believed had no harmful political interest, if not a bond of solidarity, to sell her oil."⁸⁶ Jefroudi adds that Britain extended its blockade towards the end of 1952, as a result of which "the governments of Germany, Sweden, Austria, and Switzerland were put under pressure not to let their technicians, lawyers, and accountants hired by the NIOC to leave their countries."⁸⁷

The years of blockade ended with what in Iran is known as the 28th Mordad coup d'état. In 2013, Edward Abrahamian, the prominent historian of modern Iran, published his third book on the history of modern Iran called *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations*, which investigates who was behind the coup. The need for a separate book on the coup reveals its importance and complexity. Here, I will limit myself to indicating that the American CIA, the Tehran Bazaars, the informal British networks inside the country, and Sha'aban Bimokh (Brainless Sha'aban), a traditional wrestler, all played a role in supporting the coup and with it the failure of the oil nationalization.

After the coup d'état, which took place on 19 August 1953, Mossadeq was forced to leave his position and put under house arrest till his death in 1967. Mossadeq was seen as a great threat by the British and the Americans. Abrahamian lists the derogatory terms applied to him, including fanatical, crazy, erratic, eccentric, slippery, and unbalanced.⁸⁸ He adds:

The British ambassador told his American counterpart that Iran - like Haiti - was "immature" and therefore needed to remain under the firm foreign hand for at least another two decades. Drew Pearson, the venerable dean of American journalism, believed that it would be far too dangerous for America to have gas prices and the future of the "free world" in the hands of men such as Mossadeq.⁸⁹

This point of view on Iran and its former prime minister shows the (semi) colonial attitude of the British towards Iran. Following the fall of Mossadeq, the key agent of the coup d'état, General Fazlollah Zahedi, became prime minister. The Tudeh Party was dissolved and many of its members were executed, imprisoned, or exiled. Zahedi ruled as prime minister until 1955 and then became Iran's Ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva.

⁸⁶ Jefroudi, 74.

⁸⁷ Jefroudi, 74.

⁸⁸ Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 123.

⁸⁹ Abrahamian, 121.

The coup led to the denationalization of the oil industry and was greeted with massive protests across Tehran. There were clashes in different parts of the city between pro-monarchy and anti-monarchy factions. According to Abrahamian,

while gangs from the bazaar zurkhanehs - encouraged by preachers liked to the royalist Ayatollah Behbehani and probably Ayatollah Kashani - provided mostly sound effects thirty-two Sherman tanks rolled into central Tehran, surrounded key positions, and, after a three-hour battle with three tanks protecting Mossadeq's home and the main radio station, proclaimed Zahedi to be the shah's designated and lawful prime minister.⁹⁰

On the day of the coup, Mohammad Reza Shah fled to Baghdad and then to Rome. After a while, the Shah came back to Iran and took radical action against leftist writers as well as cultural and political activists. His first task was to stabilize the country, and in order to achieve this, dissenting voices and opinions had to be silenced. With the help of the United States and a strong army, the central government was able to attain a powerful position not only in Iran but also in neighboring countries. Importantly, this era was characterized by high oil revenues. After the coup, in the 1954 consortium agreement, AIOC was renamed the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC). The agreement was signed for 25 years between Iran, British Petroleum, and American and French oil companies. NIOC received a 50 percent share of all profits.⁹¹ Abrahamian designates the period between the coup d'état and the Iranian Revolution the time of "state expansion (1953-75)."⁹² Mohammad Reza Shah was able to build a massive state structure "thanks to rising oil revenues. These rose in part because of increased production - Iran became the world's fourth largest oil producer and the world's second largest oil exporter."⁹³

In the 1960s, Mohammad Reza Shah implemented a progressive agenda under the name of the White Revolution (*Engelab-e Sefid*), which was explicitly positioned against the Red Revolution of the masses that had led to the establishment of the Soviet Union. The White Revolution had multiple components, one of which was land reform to end the feudalist village system. It also included social and educational programs designed to minimize illiteracy in rural areas. As a result of the White Revolution, and with the help of oil revenues, many educational institutions, from primary schools to universities, were established in major cities across Iran. Health programs, the national film company, and the national Iranian radio and

⁹⁰ Abrahamian, 123.

⁹¹ Abrahamian, 123.

⁹² Abrahamian, 123.

⁹³ Abrahamian, 123.

television organization followed. Women's health and women's participation in society were also regarded as major tasks of the State and Iranian people; women gained the right to study, vote, and work, and family protection laws were introduced.⁹⁴

These modernization programs were intended by the Shah to make Iran resemble western countries. However, although at first glance the White Revolution seems like it was successful, it never achieved all the results the Shah desired because of sustained opposition. Two groups constituted active obstacles to the realization of the Shah's vision: Islamic groups and leftist groups, which both emerged during the last years of the Pahlavi dynasty.

The last years of Mohammad Reza Shah are remembered as the era of mass activity carried out by SAVAK, which was equivalent to the United States' FBI and Israel's Mossad, and which had control over every single aspect of Iranian people's lives. In Abrahamian's words, "SAVAK eventually grew into some 5,000 operatives and an unknown number of part-timer informers. Some claimed that one out of every 450 males was SAVAK informer."⁹⁵ SAVAK suppressed all forms of thinking that were unacceptable to the central government through mass censorship of the media and the torture and execution of political dissidents. Mohammad Reza Shah's main order to SAVAK was to gain full control of the Tudeh Party, which became active again at the end of the 1950s. The Shah silenced, imprisoned, and executed many Tudeh members and other leftist activists, including writers, intellectuals, and those fighting for oil nationalization.

During the 1960s, leftist and Islamic groups united around a shared critique of the Westernization of Iran. This solidarity was introduced by intellectuals such as Ali Shariati, a Sorbonne graduate who promoted an anti-capitalist and Islamic philosophy based on Shi 'a ideology. Another philosopher, who would come out of this chaotic era as the big winner, was Ayatollah Khomeini, whose anti-imperialist ideas were widely popular among Iranian youths. In 1963, Ayatollah Khomeini was exiled, first to Iraq and then to Paris, which made him even more popular among anti-Shah and anti-Westernization groups. Despite all the oppression and surveillance, oppositional political parties emerged inside and outside Iran. Among the most famous are Mujahidin-e Khalq and Fadayian-e Khalq. Mojahedin-e Khalq, today known as the terrorist group MEK, is a leftist party founded in 1965 that was engaged in armed conflict against the Pahlavi's in the 1960s and 1970s. Unlike the Tudeh Party, it propagated an Islamic revolution; considered Leftist-Islamic, it was seen to support the lower and middle classes.

⁹⁴ Abrahamian, 143.

⁹⁵ Abrahamian, 126.

The 1970s are known as the time of the “One-Party State.” The Shah reacted to the critique of the people and intellectuals of Iran’s rapid modernization by setting up the brand-new Resurgence Party (*Hezb-e Rastakhiz*) and ordering all citizens to become members of this party. According to Abrahamian, the Shah believed that “those reluctant to join must be ‘secret communists.’”⁹⁶

The fallout from the 1953 coup d’état, which included the arrest of writers, activists, and intellectuals, had a large impact on Iranian literature. Dabashi refers to the poets and writers of this era as “the national icons of modernity.” However, we can also say that the 1960s ended by taking the movement of modern Iranian literature to a new level. As I will describe in more detail in Chapter 3 on the era of the petroleum struggle, oil revenues reached their highest point in the 1970s. In his book *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, and Future*, Dabashi argues that these oil revenues made possible “a decade of hope and courage.”⁹⁷ There are many reasons for the flourishing of modern Persian literature during these two decades, including the popularity of committed and socialist realist literature, the growing prominence of anti-western ideas, the increased use of metaphors, allegory and symbolism in literature to evade censorship and to express political critiques, and the translation movement.

Mir ‘abedini calls the literature of the last decades of the Pahlavi’s that of “awakeness and self-awareness.”⁹⁸ Talattof simply calls it “revolutionary literature.” These two expressions make clear that writers at this time were preoccupied with political commitment. As Talattof explains, in this era “political change became the goal of literary activity.”⁹⁹ Many of the prominent writers were also activists and most had experienced imprisonment or lived in hiding.

In *The Politics of Writing in Iran*, Talattof divides the writers of this period into two groups: one group that, in their works, defended the people and expressed commitment to their revolutionary cause, and one that disregarded serious social and political issues and aimed to write “pure” literature. Literary figures in the first group engaged in what Talattof calls *Committed Literature (Adabiyat-e Moteahed)*, which derived its principles from Marxism or, more precisely, from what they perceived to be Marxism.¹⁰⁰ Talattof details that this literature was mostly published in journals such as *Ruzegar-i Naw (New Era)*, *Payam-e Naw (New*

⁹⁶ Abrahamian, 150.

⁹⁷ Hamid Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, and Future* (Verso, 2001), 29.

⁹⁸ Hasan Mir ‘abedini, *One Hundred Years of Iranian Storywriting (Sad Sal Dastan Nevisi Iran)*, vol. 1–2 (Cheshme, 1989), 430.

⁹⁹ Talattof, *The Politics of Writing in Iran*, 69.

¹⁰⁰ Talattof, 66–67.

Message), *Jahan-e Naw (New World)*, and *Mardum (People)*, all “directly sponsored by the political parties.”¹⁰¹ The political parties in question were the Organization of People’s Mojahedin of Iran (OPMI) and the Organization of Iranian People’s Fada’i Guerillas (OIPFG).¹⁰² This development was followed by a translation movement, carried out by members of the Tudeh Party, who favored the introduction of Soviet literature. For example, according to Faraj Sarkuhi, *Mother* (1906) by Maxim Gorky was considered mandatory reading for activists during the 1960s.¹⁰³ Ahmad Mahmoud mentions the same book in *Neighbors (Hamsaye-ha)*, which I will discuss in Chapter 3.

With regard to committed literature, Talattof notes that “the themes of this literature revolved around equality, justice and freedom. The figurative expression of these issues and the glorification of heroism and martyrdom were the constitutive elements of the language in most fiction and poetry.”¹⁰⁴ While “pure” literature was a continuation of classic Persian literature of the late 19th century in form and content, committed literature was very much influenced by the socialist realist literature translated, disseminated, and discussed by members of the Tudeh Party.

Most of the committed writers were members of the Tudeh Party and had participated in the first congress of Iranian writers that was held in the Russian embassy in Tehran in the summer of 1946. Organized by the Iran-Soviet Cultural Society, the congress is known as one of the most important events in the history of modern Persian literature. Not only did many writers read their work at the congress, but fundamental discussions about “the purpose of literature” also took place. When, in 1949 the Tudeh Party was declared illegal by the government, many of its members were imprisoned, forced into exile, or experienced difficulties finding jobs or publishers. After the 1953 coup d’état, literature, which was one of the known means for the Tudeh Party to reach the proletariat and address the masses, became more engaged with political issues, especially the problem of oil.

Committed literature during the 1960s and 1970s did not have any mission other than achieving regime change. Talattof argues that “political change became the goal of literary activity.”¹⁰⁵ As a result, the language of Iranian literature changed significantly. As both Talattof and Mir‘abedini note, literary devices such as allegory, symbols, and metaphors helped

¹⁰¹ Talattof, 67.

¹⁰² سازمان مجاهدین خلق و سازمان چریکهای فدایی خلق ایران

¹⁰³ Sarkuhi notes this in the introduction to the Persian translation of *Mother*, by Ali Asgha Sorosh. Maxim Gorky, *Madar (Mother)*, trans. Ali Asghar Sorush (Negah, 2003).

¹⁰⁴ Talattof, *The Politics of Writing in Iran*, 67.

¹⁰⁵ Talattof, 69.

committed writers communicate their political messages while avoiding SAVAK censorship. Talattof believes that these writers' immersion in Marxism guided them to the genre of socialist realism: "committed writers deemphasized form, as opposed to content, arguing that the latter has a larger capacity to serve the people."¹⁰⁶ Committed literature was closely connected to the new wave of cinema that started when Ebrahim Golestan, a former member of the Tudeh Party, left it to start working for an oil company in Abadan. As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4, he established the Golestan film workshop and turned Abadan into a hub of intellectual activity. Committed literature stayed devoted to the idea of change. The writers who became revolutionary writers by the last years of the 1970s asked for an absolute change and alteration in every aspect of the society in their stories and poetries.

Post-coup d'état literature is also known as characterized by a focus on "Westoxication," which took the form of a trenchant critique of Western countries' interfering in Iran's domestic and international relations. During the 1960s and 1970s, socialist, nationalist, and Islamist components became part of a united ideological front directed against both US and Soviet imperial influences in the region, and against the central role of the Pahlavi monarchy in facilitating the American drive for global domination.¹⁰⁷ In 1962, Jalal Al-e Ahmad published the influential book *Westoxication (Gharb Zadegi)*, arguing that Iranian culture is lost by forced modernization and industrialization of the West and its colonial acts against countries such as Iran. The work of Al-e Ahmad and his followers became an important source for anti-Western and leftist activists during the 1970s, which leftist-communist activists weakened and replaced by the Muslim-left, which followed leaders such as Ali Shariati and Al-e Ahmad. The latter died in 1969, yet his anti-Western point of view, along with Ali Shariati's leftist-Islamic beliefs, remained central to cultural production until the late 1970s. Unlike the era of Persianism, in which Islam was the target of attacks by modernist writers, during the post-coup d'état period oppressed Muslims, who were subjected to forced modernization by the Pahlavi's and who were seeing the country's petroleum and culture being stolen by the west, were believed to be held by Westoxication. In fact, the anti-Islam acts of the Pahlavies were one of the main reasons of the emergence of Westoxication as an idea. By the last years of the 1970s it had turned into the dominant belief of the revolutionaries and was supported by Khomeini and his supporters as well. This is the time that a gap appeared between Marxist-leftist committed writers and Islamic-leftists. While Marxist-leftist committed writers

¹⁰⁶ Talattof, 70.

¹⁰⁷ Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted*, 130.

were put under very severe censorship, Islamic-leftists had more room to write and publicize their ideas. Ali Shariati, one of the theoreticians of the leftist-Islam movement, was writing about the sociology of Islam. He gave lectures in Hoseini-e Ershad which became very popular and aroused the jealousy of the Pahlavi regime, making it aware of this new wave of revolutionaries who needed to be controlled.

In the post-coup-d'état period, SAVAK censorship was at its highest level, causing committed literature to be steeped deeper and deeper in allegorical and symbolic language to evade it. Talattof describes this situation as follows:

Writers overthrew the regime many times allegorically and symbolically, in order to encourage people to rise against their situation. Allegory, symbol, and most importantly, metaphor became useful tools for veiling meaning meant to be conveyed to readers despite censorship efforts. Many remained anonymous for years, and some (such as A. Sayeh, A. Bambad, and Omid) were known only by pseudonyms.¹⁰⁸

In 1971, the so-called Siahkal Incident occurred in the deep jungles of the north of Iran. The Iranian Fadayi Guerillas attacked a gendarmerie post in Siahkal and killed three policemen. In response to this attack, SAVAK arrested many men and women, executed thirteen men, and created an atmosphere of fear and panic. This incident turned into a symbol of resistance in committed and revolutionary literature. Talattof mentions that, after it, “a new set of metaphors emerged” in Persian literature. For example, because the attack happened during the night, night (*Shab*) became a metaphor for the situation under the Pahlavi regime and was used by many poets, such as Ahmad Shamlou (1925-2000) and Khosro Golsorkhi (1944-executed 1974). Other metaphors inspired by the incident were the jungle and trees, or anything that referred to the damp environment of the north of Iran. The most famous poem referring to the Siahkal incident is “Plan” (“Tarh”) by Ahmad Shamlu, which contains the following lines:

Night, with a bloody throat sang late at night,
The sea is sitting cold,
A branch in the darkness of the night, is reaching the light.¹⁰⁹

However, the abovementioned symbols were only the most obvious. Karimi Hakkak believes that the fact that writers needed to adopt “ever deeper layers of symbolism” to avoid

¹⁰⁸ Talattof, *The Politics of Writing in Iran*, 69–70.

¹⁰⁹ Ahmad Shamlu, *Majmo'e Ash'ar, Daftar-e Yekom: She'r-Ha (Collection of Works, First Notebook: Poems)* (Negah, 2006), 149.

شب با گلوی خونین/ خوانده است دیرگاه/ دریا نشسته سرد/ یک شاخه در سپاهی جنگل به سوی نور/ فریاد میکشد

ensorship and calls it the “grand internalization.”¹¹⁰ Another example is the use of children's language as a literary device to avoid censorship. Samad Behrangi (1939-1968), a teacher and activist, wrote a children's story called *Mahi-e Siah Kuchulu (The Little Black Fish)*, which turned out to be one of the main revolutionary books. The story features an old fish telling the story of a little black fish who wishes to join the sea. In order to join the sea, the little fish swims up the river, taking a very long and dangerous path to achieve its dreams. The story encourages children (and people) not to be afraid of following their dreams and to overcome any obstacles put in their path.

During the last years of the Pahlavi's reign, the literary devices used by committed poets and writers become cryptic than ever because of the government's maximum pressure on any kind of literary production. Even stories which were written about rural areas or mentioned slightly struggles on the part of the protagonist with the situation in Iran were considered political. Talattof describes the situation as follows:

As the way the meaning of the metaphors should be perceived changed, the social and discursive factors that played an essential role in the rise of this episode of literary history also created a new figurative mode of reading, resulting in a sort of mutual consent among the writers and readers. By the mid-seventies, it was clear that authors and readers were working together toward a revolution.¹¹¹

This co-operation between the reader and writer made SAVAK less powerful. Nonetheless, books, essays, and articles of any kind and form were considered a danger in the eyes of SAVAK, and many people, young and old, ended up in prison for merely having books.

The 1960s and 1970s are also famous for the emergence of the translation movement. Mir'abedini, in *Sad Sal Dastan Nevisi Iran (One Hundred Years of Iranian Storywriting)*, refers to the fact that translation in this era became a profession for many writers and political activists in Iran. The translation of European literature expanded quickly and was not limited to leftist literature. This growth was provoked by the lucrative market that existed for translated literature due to the increased demand from the Iranian middle classes and specifically educated housewives. Realist Russian and American literature in particular became very popular. Writers introduced to Iranians and widely read included Jack London, Victor Hugo, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Honoré de Balzac, Ernest Hemingway, Leo Tolstoy, and Anton Chekhov.¹¹² The Franklin Book Program (*Moassesa-ye Entesharat-e Franklin*), which was run

¹¹⁰ Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, “Poetry against Piety: The Literary Response to the Iranian Revolution,” *World Literature Today* 60, no. 2 (1986): 251, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40141693>.

¹¹¹ Talattof, *The Politics of Writing in Iran*, 83.

¹¹² Mir'abedini, *One Hundred Years of Iranian Storywriting*, 299.

by an American non-profit organization, started in 1954 and gave a major impulse to the translation of world literature into Persian. Many of those who were not allowed to publish their own literary works, including Najaf Darya Bandari and Simin Daneshvar, began to work for this agency. The agency was closed in 1979, when the Franklin Book Program decided to dissolve its cooperation with Iran, but left a deep mark on the literary culture of Iran.¹¹³

To sum up, the period from the 1953 coup d'état to the Iranian Revolution in 1979 was the most prosperous era of modern Persian literature. Although there was mass censorship, the attempts to avoid it resulted in the creation of many masterpieces of modern Iranian literature. The flourishing of anti-western ideas made the literature of the era into a postcolonial representation of the time when Iran was occupied and its petroleum was fully under the control of foreigners. Furthermore, the translation movement of the time made Iranians very familiar with foreign masterpieces.

The Iranian Revolution and the Emergence of Revolutionary Literature

Protests against the Pahlavi regime grew from 1977 onward. Khomeini, who was in exile from 1964 until 1979, first in Turkey, then in Najaf, and finally in Neaphe-le-Shateau outside Paris from September 1978, became more popular during the last years of the Pahlavis. He sent his speeches and flyers to the Iranian people from exile. In 1978, one of the main cinemas in Abadan, the capital of Iran's oil industry, burnt down with around 420 people locked inside. The audience was watching *The Deer (Gavazn-ha)*, released in 1974 and directed by Masoud Kimiayi, which focuses on poverty among the masses. Rumors swirl that the fire was started by Muslim revolutionaries but the perpetrators are still unknown.¹¹⁴ The Islamic Revolution took place in January 1979. According to Abrahamian, the main reason it happened was the pressure that had been exerted by the Pahlavis for more than a decade on the Iranian people. Although Khomeini was the biggest winner of the Revolution, many of the other political parties mentioned in the previous section also played active roles in the Revolution and its aftermath. The Shah and his family left Iran on 17 January, 1979, and two weeks later Khomeini returned to Tehran.

The Revolution had a different impact on different groups of Iranians. The replacement of the secular Pahlavis by Islamic revolutionaries, and the institution of a new Islamic

¹¹³ Datus C. Smith, Jr., "Franklin Book Program," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, Vol. X 2, n.d. available online at [franklin-book-program](http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/franklin-book-program). Accessed February 9, 2021.

¹¹⁴ The perpetrators of this crime are still unknown.

constitutional law, did not make for an easy transition. Abbas Amanat describes the situation as follows:

Ideologically, it was a strange mix of return to pristine Islam, the shari'a-laden worldview of Khomeini and his cohorts in Qom, notions of Islamic modernity (as understood by tie-wearing Islamists such as Mahdi Bazargan), dormant Shi'i messianic aspirations, rampant anti-Westernism, and anti-Pahlavi sentiment. [The Revolution] demonstrated in its earlier stages genuine aspirations for democracy, freedom of speech, and human rights but also exhibited shades of leftist ideas as seen through the prism of the secular and the Islamic guerilla organizations and their sympathizers and soon the sympathizers of the revived Tudeh party.¹¹⁵

Abrahamian notes that about three million people welcomed Khomeini upon his return to Tehran in Behesht-e Zahra, the cemetery where his first speech took place.¹¹⁶ Khomeini went there to pay his respects to the martyrs of the Revolution.

The Revolution was followed closely by the invasion of Iran by the Baáthist regime of Iraq in September 1980. This war lasted eight years, killed many civilians from both countries, and left many cities on both sides in ruins. Known as the First Persian Gulf War, it was fought mostly over the petroleum-rich areas, specifically Khuzestan province. Because five of the eleven literary texts I will analyze in this study were written during the post-Revolution years, I will discuss the literary works of this period in more detail in Chapters 4 and 7. In the following section, I will briefly outline the most important developments in literature during and following the Revolution.

The Iranian Revolution was imagined in literary works before it happened. It was predicted, for example, in the Writers Association Nights held at the Goethe Institute in Tehran in October 1977. Karimi Hakkak believes that this anticipation “reveals that literature has become more kinetic, more image-centered and event-oriented, and of course more buoyant.”¹¹⁷ Ahmad Karimi Hakkak, in his article “Of Hail and Hounds: The Image of the Iranian Revolution in Recent Persian Literature,” insists that the possibility of revolution was seen by the writers as an achievable goal. According to him, “many Iranian writers saw in the idea and possibility of revolution a unifying cause, a historic opportunity, and an idea into which they could channel their creative energies.”¹¹⁸ However, Karimi-Hakkak also mentions that the way in which the Iranian Revolution unfolded also made them unsure about what would follow: “The revolutionary situation seemed to offer them new possibilities. However, the

¹¹⁵ Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History* (Yale University Press, 2017), 703.

¹¹⁶ Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 161.

¹¹⁷ Karimi-Hakkak, “Poetry against Piety 252.

¹¹⁸ Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, “Of Hail and Hounds: The Image of the Iranian Revolution in Recent Persian Literature,” *State, Culture, and Society* 1, no. 3 (1985): 152.

substance of these possibilities, the exact shape of that bold new world eluded them.”¹¹⁹ According to the *Encyclopedia Iranica*, “these ten [Writers Association Nights] became the first in a series of mass protest meetings that culminated in the Revolution of 1979.”¹²⁰ The Writers’ Association was founded in 1968 and was the first non-governmental organization to protect the rights of writers, who were mostly leftists and belonging to opposition groups. In 1977, in a very rare event, ten prose writers and poets gathered in the garden of the Goethe Institute and thousands of people listened to the poems, stories, and speeches presented. Those who gathered all wanted fundamental changes in the central government. On the fifth night, Bagher Moe ‘meni accused the state of being an abuser of the people’s beliefs. The most significant aspect of the poetry nights was the joining together of leftist and Islamic beliefs within a shared framework of anti-western and anti-imperialist sentiment. A good example of this was a poem recited by Jafar Kushrabadi about the last Imam of the Shiite Muslims who arrives on a white horse and rescues the people.

Very soon after the Revolution, writers and intellectuals who had dreamed of regime change for years became disillusioned. Fatemeh Shams describes how “following the Revolution of 1979-83 the role of the newly established Islamic state in controlling and shaping the cultural scene increased.”¹²¹ The Islamic revolutionaries took control of all the media, cultural institutions, and universities, while Islamization became the main purpose of the Revolution. By emphasizing its “Islamic” identity, the new state was trying its best to establish a new form of control over cultural and literary productions.

Fatemeh Shams describes how Howzeh, the central office of control over any cultural and artistic productions in post-Revolution Iran, introduced a new genre called “religious literary and artistic works” (*Adabiyat-va Honar-e Dini*). Howzeh’s central aim was to introduce a new cultural outlook “in favor of the ideas of the newly established state.”¹²² This new cultural outlook was accompanied by mass censorship and the imprisonment and exile of writers who had been active leftist revolutionary figures before the Revolution. Secular and opposition groups were silenced and eliminated by the state. As Talattof writes, “the regime used all its newly formed police to repress them.”¹²³ He describes the repression that occurred as follows:

¹¹⁹ Karimi-Hakkak, 152.

¹²⁰ H. E. Chehabi, “Goethe Institute – Encyclopaedia Iranica,” accessed September 28, 2019, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/goethe-institute>.

¹²¹ Fatemeh Shams, “Literature, Art, and Ideology under the Islamic Republic” in *Persian Language, Literature and Culture: New Leaves, Fresh Looks*, edited by Kamran Talattof (Routledge, 2015), 164.

¹²² Shams, 164.

¹²³ Talattof, *The Politics of Writing in Iran*, 109.

They suppressed any ethnic movement for autonomy. They violently closed down the universities for several years to deprive intellectuals of their most important base of activities. Later they attacked Marxist and other leftist activists, including the secular writers, physically and ideologically. Respect for diversity, human rights, freedom, individuality, modernity, and cultural diversity became rare. Many leftist and Marxist literary activists died, were imprisoned, exiled, or became inactive.¹²⁴

After the Revolution, the committed writers described previously were turned into wandering ghosts whose dreams had been shattered. According to Talattof, “in committed literature the ‘rise and fall’ was sort of the revolutionary process viewed optimistically, with the belief that the sequence will end with the masses rising. And the phoenix symbolized that process.”¹²⁵ But the phoenix never rose again, as Muslim activists came out of the Revolution as the winners, while the leftists ended up in prison, exiled, or silenced.

The authors of *Literature of the Islamic Revolution (Adabiyat-i Inqilab-i-I Islami)* used the symbols and imageries of committed literature, adding references to the events of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq War, as well as Islamic symbolism and metaphors. The most famous poets working in this mode are Ali-Mousavi Garmaroudi and Tahirih Safarzadieh. Both became active in the literature of the Iran-Iraq War, which became famous as “sacred defense literature” (*Adabiyat-e Defa’ e Moghadas*). This literature was produced on a large scale, with the help and support of Howzeh and other cultural centers. It aimed to legitimate a war between two Muslim countries in the eyes of the Iranian people and to encourage them to participate in it. In fact, Amir Moosavi, a literary scholar who studied the rhetoric used by both countries, argues that the Iran-Iraq War, from Iran’s point of view, “found its own place within the government’s official rhetoric and ideology.”¹²⁶ This manifested in the government using Shiite symbols to make it acceptable to wage war against the Sunni Muslims of Iraq. Furthermore, to encourage support among the youth, the Islamic Republic used the term Jihad, which means to fight against infidels.

Committed prose writers and poets who succeeded in remaining active even under pressure from the Islamic state tried hard to publish their works and be read, but this was not easy. The most poignant example of a literary work by a poet who never saw his dreamed

¹²⁴ Talattof, 109.

¹²⁵ Talattof, 111.

¹²⁶ Amir Moosavi, “Stepping Back from the Front: A Glance at Home Front Narratives of the Iran-Iraq War in Persian and Arabic Fiction,” in *Moments of Silence: Authenticity in the Cultural Expressions of the Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988*, edited by Arta Khakpour, Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami and Sholeh Vatanabadi (NYU Press, 2016), 123.

revolution is Ahmad Shamlu's (1925-2000) "In the Blind Alley," which portrays the situation of leftist, silenced writers after the Revolution. Even now, more than forty years later, students and activists inside and outside Iran recite this poem when they want to describe the suffocating post-Revolution situation. Its most famous lines are:

They smell your mouth
Lest you might have said: I love you,
They smell your heart...

Strange times, my dear

And they flog
Love
By the road-block.

We should hide love in the larder....

They keep their fire alive
By burning our songs and poems;
Do not place your life in peril by your thoughts!

Such strange time it is my dear!

He who knocked on your door in the middle of the night,
His mission is to break your Lamp!
We must hide our lights in dark closets!¹²⁷

In this poem, which was published on 22 July 1979, around five months after the Revolution, in the book *Tarane-haye Kuchak-e Qorbat (Little Homesick Songs)*, Shamlu expresses the effects of the repressive attitude of the Islamist revolutionaries on leftist activists and writers. The phrase "they smell your mouth" indicates that even when the leftist activists are silent, revolutionaries will smell their mouth to find evidence of their anti-Islamic beliefs. The line "strange times, my dear" is repeated throughout this long poem to convey to the reader the state of shock Shamlu and other leftist intellectuals and writers were in after the Revolution.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how the constitution of 1905-1911 and the discovery of petroleum in Iran in 1908 together marked the beginning of modern Iran and modern Iranian literature. The desire of the people for change, the uprising of intellectuals, the influx of petroleum

¹²⁷ Shamlu, *Collection of Works*, 824.

revenues, and the (semi)colonial dependency of Iran on the British transformed the country. Iranian literature during what I refer to as the time of petroleum consciousness (1908-1953) portrayed the process of the Iranian people becoming familiar with the power of the oil industry. The historical and literary works of this era show the people and the state, sometimes together and sometimes in opposition to each other, trying to find their way in the new world. While the constitutionalists encouraged the application of new, mostly western ideas, Reza Shah's enforced modernization was considered a brutal act of dictatorship.

During the time of the petroleum struggle (1953-1979), the Iranian people tried to come to terms with the failure of oil nationalization. The nationalization of oil in 1951 and its subsequent de-nationalization in 1953 was one of the most disturbing developments in the modern history of Iran, causing mass disappointment among Iranians. The literature that emerged in Iran between the 1953 coup d'état and the Revolution was in large part about trying to compensate for the sense of loss. Literature became a weapon of opposition against the Shah and the use of particular literary devices such as metaphor and symbolism helped writers to express their revolutionary ideas at a time of heavy censorship. The encounter of petroleum and literature during this time finds expression in writers' representations of anti-Western and anti-imperialist sentiments, as well as, more particularly, of the struggle between locals and foreigners in petroleum regions.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution and its hijacking by Islamists shocked many, especially those on the left who had dreamed of regime change for decades. It led to a period of silencing, as censorship, imprisonment, exile, and execution became the fate of leftist revolutionaries. However, some writers nevertheless managed to produce masterpieces during these years, including many about Iran's relationship to oil. In the next chapters I will begin to look at the encounter of petroleum and fiction in modern Iranian literature from the early years of the twentieth century. The next chapter focuses on the literary works of Malek Al-shoara Bahar, Sadeq Hedayat, and Jalal Al-e Ahmad.