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### Crude oil and its false promises of modernization

*Petroleum encounters in modern Iranian fiction*

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## Chapter 2

### The Era of Petroleum Consciousness (1911-1953)

In the previous chapter I explained how the modern literary tradition in Iran started in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Classic forms of poetry and prose, which had been the dominant form of literature in Iran for centuries, gradually gave up their place to modern poetry and prose. I also made clear how, parallel to the emergence of modern fiction, oil, which was first discovered in 1908 in southwest Iran, transformed the social, political, and economic lives of Iranians through what is often referred to as modernization. These changes had a global dimension, as they happened through interactions with the outside world, both in the case of modern Iranian literature, which was in a constant dialogue with other literary traditions, and that of the oil industry, which heavily depended on international actors (states, companies, workers, managers, etc.) for production, distribution, and consumption.

Known as the nation's treasure, petroleum became a metaphor for both nationalist and anti-colonial political and literary movements, which represented a continuation of ideas forged in relation to the constitutional revolution of 1905. This chapter attempts to comprehend the early oil encounter in Iranian literature by showing how the literary image of petroleum was shaped. I will emphasize how petroleum became an important subject of discussion in literary circles during the second wave of constitutional literature, after 1921. While the enlightenment of the people was the main purpose of constitutional literature, petroleum as a stolen substance began appearing in it after Reza Shah's coronation in 1921. It was during this time that people were becoming aware of the reasons for the presence of the British in the petroleum regions of Iran, and of the exploitation they brought. As this chapter will show, an important part of this awareness was created through literary works.

In this chapter, I analyze literary works by three prominent Iranian writers active between 1911 and the 1940s: Mohammad Taqi Bahar (1886-1951), Sadeq Hedayat (1903-1951), and Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923-1969). Given that Iranian modern fiction was not yet a very prominent form of literature in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is not surprising that the very first encounter of literature and petroleum occurs in classic odes recited by Mohammad Taqi Bahar, a prominent constitutionalist. The first section of the chapter discusses two of Bahar's odes that convey his changing view of the actions of the British in the emerging oil

city of Masjed Soleyman. In the sections that follow, I will analyze two allegorical satires: “The Case of the Anti-Christ’s Donkey” (1944) by Sadeq Hedayat and *The Tale of the Beehives* (1954) by Jalal Al-e Ahmad. These satires focus on critiquing the colonial aspects of the petroleum industry. In both texts, the British and the Iranian state are blamed for stealing the petroleum from the people, while the people themselves are admonished for being blind to what is happening around them. Both satires use allegorical language in order to be able to convey their critical message while escaping the constitutional censorship of the time.

Mohammad Taqi Bahar, known as *Malek o-Sho‘ara* (king of poets), was one of the most renowned Iranian poets of his time, and also an intellectual, writer, politician, and university lecturer. He joined the constitutionalist movement in Khorasan Province, in the northeast of Iran, and recited poems containing enlightened ideas about freedom and democracy. During the constitutional revolutions (1905-1911), he became one of the main intellectual figures of the movement, publishing newspapers and writing articles. Around 1921, Bahar was elected to the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth parliament. It was during the sixth parliament (1926-1928) that he was invited by the British to visit Masjed Soleyman in 1927 with other members of parliament.

Bahar was imprisoned by Reza Shah after his coronation in 1929. He was again imprisoned in 1933 and exiled to Isfahan. After his return, he taught at the Faculty of Literature of the University of Tehran until Reza Shah’s abdication in 1941. According to the *Encyclopedia Iranica*, he became politically active again during the Anglo-Russian invasion in 1941, when he published the newspaper *Now-Bahar*. He took a seat in the fourteenth parliament of Iran and became the Minister of Education in 1946, only to resign after a few months for an unknown reason. He headed the democrats and participated in the election for the fifteenth parliament when he was already ill. In 1947, he went to Switzerland for treatment but he eventually returned to Iran and died there in 1951.

Bahar wrote two odes about the petroleum encounter in Iran. In the first one, which is called *Masjed Soleyman*, he praises the actions of the British in Masjed Soleyman and expresses pleasant surprise at the improvements they have brought. At the time of WWII Bahar reconsidered his position, producing another ode expressing a much more critical point of view. This second ode, which is called *Curse to the British (Nefrin be Engelis)*, excoriates the British for their interference in other parts of the world and especially in Iran during the war. The two odes have contradictory contents, illustrating the ambiguity many Iranians felt towards the actions of the British oil company.

Bahar begins *Masjed Soleyman* by having the lyrical I exalt the historical background of the city:

The ancient worshipers of god had completed an incredible task  
They had made a temple over a mountain with stones  
Twenty stairs are made with stone to reach the porch  
A cistern is embedded beneath the porch<sup>128</sup>

These lines refer to the ancient temple built in the mountainous region by Iranians of the pre-Islamic era, which is hailed as an “incredible” feat. The temple is said to be located around a burning soil, probably caused by petroleum leaking through the surface. The ode continues by referencing the fact that, besides the temple, there was nothing in the area. The lyrical I then jumps to 1927, recalling:

It was 1927 and it was the beginning of spring  
A very shining spring by the blossom of flowers,  
We have read in the books of the spring of Shushtar  
I have seen that it is said out of honesty<sup>129</sup>

In the following lines, the lyrical I recounts how, while he was sitting on one of the steps of the temple, he thought about the past and the present of the place. He refers to different dynasties of pre-Islamic Iran, including the Mazdisnan, Parthian, and Sasanian empires, emphasizing the long history of civilization in the region. He remembers it getting dark and being amazed by the fact that this isolated region, at nighttime, is lighted by electricity, making it seem as though there are stars on the ground:

I looked down and my eyes were surprised,  
It seemed that the soil was shining by the stars  
For around fifty kilometers the mountains suddenly,  
Became as light as day, as if you have imprisoned the night  
With the brightness of lights in the houses and on the paths,  
It seemed that the night stars were captured in the deserts

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<sup>128</sup> Mohammad Taqi Bahar, *Divan Ash‘ar Mohammad Taqi Bahar (Malek o-Shoara)* (Negah, 2008), 348. All translations of Bahar’s work are mine.

حق پرستان سلف، کاری نمایان کرده اند  
معبدی بر کوهسار از سنگ بنیان کرده اند  
بیست پله بر نهاده پیش ایوانی ز سنگ  
زیرش انباری برای آب باران کرده اند

<sup>129</sup> Bahar, 348.

یکهزار و سیصد و شش بود و آغاز ربیع  
کاندر آن وادی زگل گفتمی چراغان کرده اند  
خوانده بودم در کتب، وصف بهار شوشتر  
یافتم کان را ز روی صدق، عنوان کرده اند

I remembered in that modernized antiquated area  
Where the British have invited me with some fellow friends  
[Because] this is the company of the British and Iranians  
Who have amazed the world with their artistry<sup>130</sup>

The lyrical I refers to the light that has been brought by the petroleum industry and its structures (houses and paths). He is sitting in the middle of the mountainous area of Masjed Soleyman and is amazed by all the progress that has been made, progress symbolized by dark becoming light, and by an antiquated area becoming modernized. The lyrical I explains that he and his friends were invited to this region by the British, but he pointedly refers to the oil company as also Iranian, portraying the accomplishments as a result of the “artistry” of both the British and the Iranian people.

The ode continues by referring to the engineering feats of the British in the Masjed Soleyman region:

They brought water up to the mountain from the Karoun river,  
And sent oil to the desert by pipes,  
You cannot say that this is magic or nobility or witchery  
With the help of science, they have done it all  
With the drill of science and artistry they have pierced the stone,  
And thrown petroleum from the deep pit into the sky<sup>131</sup>

The lyrical I emphasizes that these accomplishments, which appear unreal, did not involve magic, but came about because of the use of science. It was science and artistry that allowed the British to drill down through the stone and make petroleum spurt into the sky.

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<sup>130</sup> Bahar, 349.

سر به زیر افکندم و ناگه دو چشمم خیره شد  
خاک را گفتم ز اخترها درخشان کرده‌اند  
هشت فرسنگ اندر آن کهسارها یل ناگهان  
روز شد گفتم مگر شب را به زندان کرده‌اند  
از فروغ برقها در خانه‌ها و راهها  
اختر شیگرد را سر در بیابان کرده‌اند  
یادم آمد کاندرا این آباد ویران مرا  
انگلیسان با رفیقی چند، مهمان کرده‌اند  
شرکت نفت بریتانی و ایران است این  
کز هنرمندی جهان را مات و حیران کرده‌اند

<sup>131</sup> Bahar, 349.

آب را با آتش از کارون به بالا برده‌اند  
نفت را با لوله سرگرد بیابان کرده‌اند  
تا نگوئی معجز است این یا کرامت یا که سحر  
با فشار علم، هم این کرده هم آن کرده‌اند  
سنگ را با مته علم و هنر، سنبیده نرم  
نفت را از قعر چه زی اوج، پران کرده‌اند

The lyrical I continues to stress how the process of drilling and extracting oil is strange but also not strange, something to marvel at but not something that lies outside the realm of the possible:

Look at this strange incident that from the bitumen  
They have separated petroleum and gasoline  
If the fire had turned into a rosary, for the son of Azar, it would not be strange  
Since the prick garden of Naftoon turned into a rosary as well<sup>132</sup>  
The wells are aware of the secret of the hearth of the earth  
The towers of palaces are in agreement with wisdom...  
The ruined village of O'badan, which was an example,  
Now is a city full of palaces and streets<sup>133</sup>

The lyrical I refers to bitumen, which is one of the products of the refinery, very similar to crude oil. He believes that one of the seemingly magical tasks of the refinery is to turn this black and sticky substance into petroleum and gasoline. Then he refers to a story about the prophet Abraham in Islamic mythology, which tells of Abraham breaking all the idols from pre-Islamic times and of the fire turned into a rosary for him by the will of god. The lyrical I adds that instead of being incomprehensible, the process of drilling for and refining oil is founded on an awareness of the secret held within the earth. Having brought this secret, in the form of oil, to the surface, the British have converted, in their wisdom, what was a village into a modern urban landscape.

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<sup>132</sup> The first oil well discovered in the city of Masjed Soleyman in 1908 was in an area which today is called "Naftoon."

<sup>133</sup> Bahar, 349.

این شگفتی بین که همخوابه قیر سیاه  
چون مجزا نفت و بنزین فروزان کرده‌اند  
نار اگر شد گلستان بر پور آذر دور نیست  
بین که خارستان نفتون را گلستان کرده‌اند  
حلقه های چاه شان خوانده ز دل راز زمین  
برج های قصرشان با عقل پیمان کرده‌اند  
... قریه ویران عبادان که بد ضرب المثل  
این زمان شهریش پر قصر و خیابان کرده‌اند

Abadan, which used to be called ‘Obadan, was a small village before the oil industry arrived and anglicized its name. The lyrical I suggest that the former village was an example of a deserted area, but has now, with the help of the petroleum, been made part of an advanced urban civilization. In this ode, Bahar, who was among the modernist writers who still used the classic forms of Persian poetry, not only notes the changes the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company wrought in the south-west of Iran, but praises them as part of a modernization process he welcomes.

In the following lines, as the lyrical I continues to praise the British, the disciplined process of petroleum extraction in Khuzestan province (which includes exercising control over workers and locals) is compared favorably to the lack of such discipline in Tehran, the capital of Iran:

I saw such discipline in this region and surprisingly  
[This is the kind of discipline] that people of Tehran have been wishing for for years<sup>134</sup>

In the last lines of the ode, the lyrical I compares Iranians with the British. While in previous lines he praised the British and also the Iranians, and presented the modernization of Masjed Soleyman as a British-Iranian cooperation, in the last lines he proclaims that the British are more successful than the Iranians because they know the value of time and science:

“Time” in Iran is abundant; however, “science”  
Is rare and expensive; but the British have done an opposite job  
They made Time rare and costly,  
And made science plentiful and affordable.  
The British are doing this job, and the people of Naseri<sup>135</sup>  
Are happy that they converted a Sabi<sup>136</sup> to a Muslim<sup>137</sup>

<sup>134</sup> Bahar, 349.

انتظاماتی که در آن خطه دیدم، ای عجب  
سالها خلق آرزویش را به تهران کرده‌اند

<sup>135</sup> Naseri was the name of Ahwaz during the Qajar dynasty (1789-1925); in mentioning Naseri, Bahar refers to the people of Khuzestan province in general.

<sup>136</sup> The Sabi or Mandaeans (صابی/ مندایی) are an ethnoreligious group living originally in Khuzestan province, Iraq, Jordan, and Syria. Now, many of them have emigrated to western countries and formed diaspora communities. They practice Mandaism, which is a branch of the Gnostic religion. In Iran, they are known as the believers of the prophet Noah. They mostly live near the rivers and practice their religious rituals in the running water. In Ahwaz, you can see their baptism in early mornings in the Karun river.

<sup>137</sup> Bahar, 350.

وقت، در ایران فراوانست و ارزان، لیک علم  
هست کمیاب و گران و اینان دگرسان کرده‌اند  
وقت را بسیار کمیاب و گران کردند، لیک  
در برابر علم را افزون و ارزان کرده‌اند  
انگلیسان اندرین کارند و اهل ناصری  
خرمند از اینکه یک صابی مسلمان کرده‌اند  
تو ز من خواهی برنج ای مدعی خواهی مرنج

According to the lyrical I, the only art of the people of Naseri, which is the former name of Ahwaz, is that they converted the Sabi to Islam, whereas the British have introduced productivity (the idea that time should not be wasted, but should be monetized and used to produce things) to aid science, thus achieving the great things listed earlier in the ode. Therefore, while at the beginning of the ode, the lyrical I praised both Iranians and the British, in the last lines he presents Iranians as lazy and not willing to promote science. This ode, then, can be seen as highly supportive of the interventions of the British in Iran.

Bahar's second ode about petroleum, *Curse the British*, was written in a very different period. During WWII, the British, whose occupation of the south of Iran and all its ports was considered the main reason for the entry of Iran into the war, became the subject of critiques by many nationalist poets. During the time of Reza Shah, anti-British sentiments gradually became more prevalent among Iranians and during WWII they were expressed publicly more and more often. One of the reasons for this was the failure of Reza Shah and the Parliament to find a way to remove the British from the south and end their unofficial rule there.

Although Bahar recited poems in traditional forms, he insisted on discussing liberal and modern ideas, and wanted his poetry to comment on incidents that were happening to the Iranian people. In *Curse the British*, he talks about the presence of the British in the south, not as professionals working together with Iranians, which was how he referred to them in the previously discussed ode, but as military occupiers. Whereas previously the British were hailed for modernizing Iran, now their departure and defeat is vehemently wished for:

O Britain, I hope you become desperate and disgraceful  
I hope you become placeless in Asia and are sent out of Europe<sup>138</sup>

This time, instead of being seen as working with the Iranians, the British are portrayed as colonizers who have sent their army all over Asia. The lyrical I wishes for the British to lose their territories in Asia and to be exiled from Europe, so that they will be without a place. The lyrical I continues by listing the petroleum cities in Iran he wants the British to leave:

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این هنرمندان به عصر خویش احسان کرده‌اند.

<sup>138</sup> Bahar, 553.

انگلیسا در جهان بیچاره و رسوا شوی  
ز آسیا آواره کردی وز اروپا و پا شوی



[I hope] you will get away from Lali<sup>139</sup> and get out of Haftkel<sup>140</sup>  
and out of sorrow, your spirit gets flaring similar to the oil flares  
When you remember the refinery of Iraq  
Your heart becomes like a furnace and your eyes full of blood<sup>141</sup>

Where in Bahar's earlier ode, the oil company districts of Naftoon and Lali in Masjed Soleyman were listed as accomplishments of the British, now the lyrical I curses the British and wants them to leave.

The lyrical I suggests he also wants the British removed from Iraq, and for them to bitterly regret the loss of their refinery in that country. The same feeling of regret, moreover, should haunt them with regard to the loss of their assets in Iran:

When you remember Abadan and oil tankers  
You become stormy like the sea because of this loss  
When you remember Iraq and the beach of Arvand-rood  
You become like a drop-in wave of sadness, sometimes down sometimes up<sup>142</sup>

The lyrical I makes clear that he wants the rage of the British about their loss of the Abadan refinery and their oil tankers to make them "stormy like the sea." He then refers to Iraq again and to the Arvand river, which is on the Iraq-Iran border. He wishes for the British to become like a small drop of water going up and down in the waves of this river, which are waves of sadness. Then he names all the places which are unofficially under the control of the British and their oil companies in Iran and Iraq, before referring to the interference of the British in Palestine, Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Bahrain, Oman, and [South] Africa. The lyrical I wishes that the British will become hopeless in all these places, lose them, and be forced to escape to Burma, Siam, New Zealand, Singapore, and India, to finally take refuge in Canada. Then he refers again to the oil of Khuzestan province:

[I wish you would] take the love of swallowing the oil of Khuzestan and Musel

<sup>139</sup> Lali is the name of one of the villages next to Masjed Soleyman, which was turned into a small oil company town.

<sup>140</sup> Haftkel(هفتکل) is the second oil town of Iran in Khuzestan province.

<sup>141</sup> Bahar, 553.

بگذری از لالی و بیرون شوی از هفت کل  
وز غم نفتون روان پر شعله نفت آسا شوی  
چون که یاد آری ز پالایشگه نفت عراق  
دل کنی چون کوره و دیده خون پالا شوی

<sup>142</sup> Bahar, 554.

چون که یاد آری ز آبادان و کشتی های نفت  
موج زن از شور دل ماندهی دریا شوی  
چون کنی یاد از عراق و ساحل اروندرود  
قطره زن در موج غم گه زیر و گه بالا شو

To the grave and become displaced in this life and the next one<sup>143</sup>

In this verse, the lyrical I returns to the problem of oil and to Khuzestan and Musel, the petroleum cities of Iraq and Iran. He wishes for the British to die and end up cut off from the oil they love to swallow, displaced like the people they have taken the oil from.

In the following lines, the lyrical I refers to the interference of the British in Russia, nothing that, if it was possible, the British would take the whole country of Iran. Then he refers to Afghanistan and the fact that the British have always interfered with the will of this country. Finally, the poem proclaims that the British are responsible for WWII and have caused the deaths of millions of young people:

You flamed the fire of the World War  
And are the main reason for the death of millions of youths<sup>144</sup>

While the ode ends with a critique of the colonial influence of the British around the world, it takes off from a critique of their control of Iran's petroleum regions. In the end, Bahar's two odes, with their diametrically opposed assessments of the British, represent the two attitudes that continued to co-exist in Iranian petrofiction: an attitude of praising the petroleum modernity provided by the British and other foreigners, and an attitude of cursing the oil industry's semi-colonial grip on the region.

In the following section, I will analyze the image of petroleum in one of the satires by Sadeq Hedayat. I will show that, in this satire, Hedayat not only curses the British, but also blames the Pahlavi dynasty and the people for their ignorance and passivity in the face of the actions of the British.

### **“The Case of the Anti-Christ's Donkey” by Sadeq Hedayat**

“The Case of the Anti-Christ's Donkey” (“Qazie-ye Khar Dajjal”) is a satire by Sadeq Hedayat (1903-1951), known by literary scholars as the first modernist Iranian writer. Hedayat was born in 1907 to an aristocratic family in Tehran and attended St. Louis, a French missionary school in Tehran, and Dar ul-Fonoon, the first modern high school in Iran. He was among the first

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<sup>143</sup> Bahar, 554.

عشق بلع نفت خوزستان و موصل را به گور  
برده و آوازه از دنیا و مافیها شوی

<sup>144</sup> Bahar, 554.

آتش جنگ عمومی را نمایی شعله ور  
قتل میلیونها جوان را علت اولی شوی

Iranian students selected to travel to Europe and continued his education in Ghent, studying civil engineering. Hedayat was one of the opponents of Reza Shah's reforms, whom Abrahamian describes as the "intelligencia," composed of "young professionals who had been influenced by the left while studying in France and Germany during the turbulent early 1930s."<sup>145</sup> Hedayat left Ghent after eight months and went on to study architecture in Paris. In 1930, he returned to Iran without a degree. This was the time of Reza Shah's modernization programs, Russian involvement in the north, and the British occupation of the south as well as the oil regions. Homa Katouzian explains the condition of the country at the time of Hedayat's return as follows:

When Hedayat returned home from France in 1930 Reza Shah's star was still rising fast. It fell in 1941, when the allies invaded the land, and the shah took the sea. During those eleven years Hedayat lived the life of a social and intellectual gypsy. Yet contrary to long held popular myths, neither his rootlessness nor his despair was wholly or mainly a product of the repressive social and intellectual atmosphere of the Golden era.<sup>146</sup>

Hedayat felt very disappointed about the situation. He changed jobs frequently and moved from one place to another, participating in literary groups, mostly Rab'eh, which followed Parisian modernist practices. In his writings, he attacked the monarchy and the clergy. Three years after his return to Iran, he witnessed the 1933 agreement between the British and Iran. This agreement declared that British control over Iranian oil would be extended for thirty-two more years. Instead of finishing in 1961, the agreement would now only end in 1993. According to Katouzian, letters and stories written by Hedayat prove that he was deeply dissatisfied with what was taking place in Iran, and was severely critical of the actions of the state and the people.

Katouzian quotes a letter that Hedayat wrote to a friend, Taqi Razavi, in Paris, mentioning Reza Shah's abrogation of the British Oil Agreement:

[The 1933 Oil Agreement] is an important historical document, for it is the only one of its kind, which reflects the skeptical attitude of the intelligentsia towards the apparently triumphal decision of the state even before its full implications for the country had become clear: if you have any interest in recent news, it is the news of the abrogation of the British Oil Agreement for which they had lighted special lights in the city tonight, and the people were busy living it up.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 96.

<sup>146</sup> Homa Katouzian, *Sadeq Hedayat: The Life and Legend of an Iranian Writer* (I.B. Tauris, 2002), 47.

<sup>147</sup> Katouzian, 52.

In this letter, which Katouzian claims “is an important historical document, for it is the only one of its kind,” the sensitive feelings of Hedayat towards the international agreements of the country and the actions of the Pahlavi become clear.<sup>148</sup> It is in these early years of Hedayat’s stay in Iran that he experienced a severe alienation from his surroundings. In response, he moved to India and lived there from 1936 to 1937. During his stay in India, he learned the Pahlavi language (Middle Persian) from the Parsi Zorastarian community in Bombay, where he wrote *Blind Owl*, known as the first modern novella in Persian literature. Hedayat returned to Europe in 1951; that same year, he committed suicide in Paris.

References to the problem of petroleum are not limited to Hedayat’s fiction. In *The Morvari Cannon (Top-e Morvari)*, Hedayat mentions the problem of oil, but in a very general way; he refers to the petroleum revenues as a problem because they are the cause of corruption during the time of Reza Shah. However, “The Case of Anti-Christ’s Donkey” has more to say about the petroleum encounter, which is the reason that I will look at this story in detail.

In “The Case of the Anti-Christ’s Donkey,” Hedayat uses allegorical language to articulate his position. The story was written and published in 1944, as part of a collection of stories titled *Velengari (Mucking About)*. At the time, Iran was struggling against the Soviet forces in the north, and the British in the south. The story is about the rise and fall of Reza Shah (1925-1944), which, as explained earlier, coincided with the most prosperous times of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. The story was written during a time when, according to Katouzian, “many writers, poets and journalists were attacking Reza Shah and his rules in various forms, sometimes by using open abuse and invective.”<sup>149</sup> For Hedayat, this was a time when he still had hope that the political situation in Iran would change.

“The Case of the Anti-Christ’s Donkey” is the first story in Persian literature in which oil is considered a treasure, or rather a national form of capital. It is an allegory about flocks of sheep (representing the Iranians) who wear trousers and live in a “stupid land” (Iran).<sup>150</sup> Carefree and untroubled, they do not bother themselves with important issues, but simply ruminate in the meadow. They are, however, under threat from the jackals (representing the Russians), who pretend to protect the land from the foxes (representing the British), even though there are times when the jackals and foxes cooperate. The story also features a ghoulish

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<sup>148</sup> Katouzian, 52.

<sup>149</sup> Katouzian, 203.

<sup>150</sup> “Stupid land” is Katouzian’s translation of the place Hedayat describes as *Mamlekat-e Khar Dar Chaman*, which literally means the country of grass-eating donkeys.

blackguard (representing Reza Khan/Reza Shah) who, with the help of a Hyena (representing Sayyad Zia), pretends to be protecting the Glittering Stone (representing the oil) from both the foxes and the jackals.<sup>151</sup>

“The Case of the Anti-Christ’s Donkey” begins by referring to a fox who has been roaming around the “stupid land” for a while with his camera, thermos flask, raincoat, and glasses. By smelling and touching his muzzle in various places, he finds out that under the land there lie considerable treasures (petroleum). The fox comes up with a trick so that he can lay his hands on the treasures before anybody else. As his habit is to intervene in others’ business, the fox sets out to involve himself with the life of the sheep. The sheep, in response, tell him: “do whatever you like to do. But for god’s sake do not bother our pasturing.”<sup>152</sup> In order to carry out his plan, the fox starts looking for someone who can master the sheep. He finds a ghoulish blackguard who has a stable full of jackals. Living in the dirt, the ghoulish blackguard constantly screams in hunger. They begin to cooperate and steal the glittering stone from under the sheep, becoming richer and richer. They build corrals like skyscrapers with cement and when they pass each other, they say “Bonjour Monsieur.”<sup>153</sup> They also chew peppermint gum, attach gold-leaf to their bottoms, and wax their hooves.

One night, the ghoulish blackguard (Reza Shah), after doing all his duties according to plan, becomes inebriated from too much drinking and smoking. The fox and the jackals decide that this is the end of this plan. They get rid of him and send him away from the stupid land. They also collect their own belongings, put a dragon (representing the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company) in charge of the glittering stones, and leave. In their absence, the stupid land devolves into chaos. Some sheep become unsatisfied with the dance of the hyenas around the glittering stone. However, they do not take any action until another ghoulish blackguard (Mohammad Reza Shah, the son of Reza Shah) arrives to run the stupid land. The main point the story makes is that the sheep are happy and satisfied as long as there is enough grass for them to chew.

Through this allegorical story, Hedayat sharply criticizes the Iranian people’s reaction to the political chaos of the time, the corruption of the central government, and the deceitful

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<sup>151</sup> Seyyed Zia Tabatabayi (1888-1969) was a journalist and politician who helped Reza Khan to commit a coup d’état against the Qajar dynasty in 1921, which made Seyyed Zia the prime minister of the last king of the Qajar dynasty. He resigned in May 1921 and was sent into exile. His time as prime minister was very short (around 90 days) but is considered very important in transferring power from the Qajar to the Pahlavi dynasty.

<sup>152</sup> Sadeq Hedayat, “Qazie-ye Khar Dajjar” (“The Case of the Anti-Christ’s Donkey”), in *Alviyeh Khanom va Velengari (Miss Alviyeh and Mucking About)* (Amir Kabir, 1963), 122. All translations from Hedayat’s story are mine.

<sup>153</sup> Hedayat, 123.

role of the British. “Ghoulis blackguard” is the English translation of *Dualpa* (دوالپا), which Katouzian uses in his 1991 book *Sadeq Hedayat: The Life and Legend of an Iranian Writer*. The *Dualpa* is an Iranian mythical creature with a very stubborn character. It has long, deformed feet and attaches itself to the backs of others, forcing them to walk for him. In the story, the *Dualpa* represents Reza Shah. His exploitation of the Iranian people is depicted as the *Dualpa* trying to fool around the stable of the sheep and keep them focused on their grazing so that the fox can easily steal the glittering stone.<sup>154</sup> The *Dualpa* makes the sheep weak with parties and opium, until he is sent to “the sewage hole” by the fox and the jackals, which is a reference to the exiling of Reza Shah by the allies to South Africa.<sup>155</sup>

This allegorical story is the most powerful example of early Iranian oil fiction. It features all the players involved in the oil encounter and outlines their attitudes towards the oil and what happened to them between the discovery of oil and the fall of Reza Shah and the reign of his son. The story represents the era of pre-nationalization and emphasizes how oil occupied a peripheral position in the lives of average Iranians, who are represented as the sheep that pay the glittering stone no attention. Hedayat uses the coded allegorical language of classic Persian poetry not only because he is writing during the stifling period of the WWII, but also because he did not have sufficient information about the oil regions, the oil royalties, and the exact history of the oil industry to write a realistic account. In its portrayal of the sheep separated and distracted from the oil by the grass they eat, the story demonstrates the detachment Iranian intellectuals felt from the oil industry, a detachment that was only overcome in later years as more information about the oil industry and its history became available. Because of this detachment, “The Case of the Anti-Christ’s Donkey” succeeds in giving readers a broad picture of the contentious political and social relations around Iranian oil, but cannot engage with the specificities of how the oil industry worked on the ground in Iran’s oil regions.

Hedayat’s allegory, which can be seen as a national allegory in Jameson’s sense, represents local Iranians as ignorant sheep who are only focused on feeding themselves and being entertained. It is the ignorance of the people and the evilness of their ruler that, according to the story, makes Iran a “stupid land” and allows its riches to be stolen by foreigners. In asserting this, “The Case of the Anti-Christ’s Donkey” differs markedly from Bahar’s first ode, which portrays Iran as a country with a long history in which Iranians accomplished great things. In the second ode, furthermore, Bahar’s criticism is still not aimed at the Iranian people,

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<sup>154</sup> Hedayat, 124.

<sup>155</sup> Hedayat, 126.

but at the British and their colonial acts in Iran and other countries. The allegorical form which is used by Hedayat in part to make a political point and in part because of his distance from the actual operation of the oil company, is also used in one of the stories of Jalal Al-e Ahmad, who, as I will show in the next section, narrates the fraught relationship between oil, the Iranian state, and the people as an allegory about a bee farm.

### ***The Tale of the Beehives by Jalal Al-e Ahmad***

In Jalal Al-e Ahmad's *The Tale of the Beehives*, published in 1954, only one year after the coup d'état, the "glittering stone" of Sadeq Hedayat's story is transformed into honey. Al-e Ahmad (1923-1969) was a prominent novelist, short story writer, and philosopher. He is well known for his simple style of writing, which became fashionable after his death, and remains so today. He caught the attention of the Iranian public, and in particular that of intellectuals, with his 1958 novella titled *School's Principal (Modir-e Madrese)*, in which he tries to capture his own character and that of his fellow intellectuals in the portrayal of the socialist-nationalist principal of a primary school in Tehran. He became known for his stubborn characters, critical ideas, and controversial professional and private life. In 1962, he published his best-known and most controversial essay, titled "Westoxification," or "Occidentalism." "*Gharbzadegi*," as it is titled in Persian, was based on Al-e Ahmad's leftist ideas, grounded in the thought of Frantz Fanon and Karl Marx. Hamid Dabashi sees the period in which Al-e Ahmad published this essay as a transformative period in the history of modern Iran: "Modern Iranian political culture entered a whole new phase, in which socialist, nationalist, and Islamist components were urged to become part of a united ideological front against both US and Soviet imperial influence in the region, and against the central role of the Pahlavi monarchy in facilitating the American drive for global domination."<sup>156</sup>

Oil played a central role in this transformative period, as I outlined before, and Al-e Ahmad's writings engaged explicitly with the petroleum problem. Significantly, unlike Hedayat, he visited Khuzestan's oil regions several times before the 1953 coup d'état to organize trade unions for the Tudeh Party. He begins his 1965 "Report of Khuzestan" ("*Gozarashi az Khuzestan*") by pointing to the special characteristics of this region:

The person who gives this report has commuted to Khuzestan several times since 1943 and I am emphasizing that commuting means going and coming and not just going. Since this region is not a province that just sits and waits for you to go there [as a tourist] and show off your ego

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<sup>156</sup> Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted*, 130.

from here to there. The egoistic person that I am is a traveler to your [Khuzestan's] villages, which have hungry and sick people. Or this is me discovering your unknown roads, which have been the passage for everybody and nobody.<sup>157</sup>

In the report, which was prepared for the Tudeh Party, Al-e Ahmad combines his poetic imagination with a factual description of what he is seeing in Khuzestan. While there, he organized trade unions and observed the living conditions of workers and their families. In the above passage, he notes that, although the villages of Khuzestan are poor and full of hungry and sick people, the province is a destination for many. As an observer and delegate of the Tudeh Party, Al-e Ahmad takes in Khuzestan and other oil regions with an analytical look. He examines the region from different angles, as a result of having stayed in hostels in Ahwaz and in the worker's districts of Abadan, "better for worms than for people's children."<sup>158</sup> Besides this critical "Report of Khuzestan" and the "Westoxication" essay, in 1956 Al-e Ahmad wrote a story in a very different style, discussing the problem of oil in the form of the children's fable *The Tale of the Beehives*.

Critics have debated Al-e Ahmad's choice to use this genre. In the *Encyclopedia Iranica*, for example, J.W. Clinton argues that *The Tale of the Beehives* is no more than a children's book: "[In it] the substitution of honey for oil and bees for people veils allusions to the oil nationalization crisis [...] [It] is no more than a children's tale whose topical allusions give it momentarily a more serious interest."<sup>159</sup> I disagree with Clinton because I believe that, similar to Hedayat's "The Case of the Anti-Christ's Donkey", Al-e Ahmad's choice of the genre of allegory and the simple language of a children's book, is essential for the political message he wanted to send to the Iranian people. Similar to Hedayat, Al-e Ahmad believed that the people of Iran were either ignoring the exploitative nature of the oil industry or unable to understand it. To make them see what was happening in the oil regions of Iran (something his earlier factual report had not managed to do), he tried to explain it to them in the simplest way possible. In his article "Oil and Persian Fiction," M.R. Ghanoonparvar supplements this view by explaining that *The Tale of the Beehives* is a serious text that drew attention to the exploitation of farmers and advocated for a return to ancestral life. For Ghanoonparvar, the use

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<sup>157</sup> Jalal Al-e Ahmad, "Gozareshi Az Khuzestan" ("A Report from Khuzestan") *Arash* no. 10 (1965): 143–62. The translation of this paragraph is mine:

این که گزارش میدهد از سال ۱۳۲۲ باین سمت با خوزستان مدام در رفت و آمد بوده است. می گویم "با" خوزستان و نه "به" خوزستان. و نیز "در رفت و آمد" میگویم نه رفتن تنها. یعنی آن ولایت برای من تنها یک ولایت نبوده است که تنها بانتظار بنشیند تا تو سراغش را بگیری و قدم رنجه کنی و بار خودخواهی را از این گوشه بآن گوشه بکشی. فخر فروشان که این منم که مسافر دهکوره های توام با آدمهای گرسنه و تراخمی ات. یا این منم که پویندهی راههای ناشناختهی توام که معبر هزاران کس و ناکس بوده. از کتاب *گزارشی از خوزستان*، جلال آل احمد. ص ۴۳.

<sup>158</sup> Al-e Ahmad, "A Report from Khuzestan," 145.

<sup>159</sup> J.W. Clinton, "Al-e Ahmad, Jalal," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, n.d.



of allegory at this time in Iranian history was a necessary form of “literary subterfuge.”<sup>160</sup> This statement by Ghanoonparvar complements my claim that, if we look at petrofictions as national allegories, we can understand the psychological and political concerns of the writers who produced these stories.

*The Tale of the Beehives* features a gardener called Kamand Ali who has twelve apiaries in his garden. In the summertime, the apiaries are positioned directly under the sunlight in the middle of the garden, next to some flowers and apple trees. During the winter, Ali puts the beehives inside. The honey makes him famous in the neighborhood and rich, as he sells 150 kilograms every year. This gets him a significant fortune, for which he did not have to spend a penny or do much work. He received the first beehive from a friend and over the years expanded their number. At first, he collects the honey once a year, but the fortune he makes is so large that he decides to start collecting the honey twice a year.

The story also goes inside the apiaries to provide the point of view of the bees. They work during the whole year in order to have enough honey saved for the winter. Every year, a hand, which they referred to as the “disaster” (*bala*, بلا) breaks into the apiaries and steals their honey. The disaster is a huge and solid creature that cannot be paralyzed by beestings. The anxiety of the bees increases when the disaster begins to come twice a year to steal their provisions. Every time he steals their honey, the disaster puts a bowl of syrup (sugar sap) in the apiaries to distract the bees. Eating the syrup makes the bees fat, disabled, and useless, and also attracts ants:

You all know that ants are thieves. A bastard creature like the ant, which has neither talent nor capability, has no other option than to dig tunnels and to steal our belongings. We can neither get rid of it, nor can we be safe from it. So we can't deal with ants. Ants mind their own business, and we mind ours. Ants have been created to steal and to get into people's storehouses. They can neither produce their own food, nor do they have the patience to work. That is why they go stealing.<sup>161</sup>

The bees begin to realize that it is not possible to continue living like this, and the queen bees gather to resolve the problem.

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<sup>160</sup> M.R. Ghanoonparvar, “Oil and Persian Fiction: Literary Depictions of Coping,” in *Iran and the Middle East: Transnational Encounters and Social History*, edited by Houchang Chehabi, Peyman Jafari, and Maral Jefroudi (I.B. Tauris, 2015), 202.

<sup>161</sup> Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Sargozasht Kando-Ha (The Tale of the Beehives)* (Vozara, 1954), 54. All translations from Al-e Ahmad's text are mine.

همتون می دونین که مورچه دزده، جونور حرومزاده‌ای مٹ مورچه که نه هنری داره و نه کاری از دستش برمیاد، چاره‌ای نداره مگه هی از زیر نقب بزنه و هی مال من و شما رو باز کنه و ببره. ما هم نه می تونیم از خونه بیرونش کنیم و نه از دستش امون داریم. خوب، پس حریف مورچه‌هام نیستیم. مورچه واسه خودش خلقتی داره و کاری، ما هم کاری و خلقتی. مورچه خلق شده واسه دزدی و رخنه کردن تو. انبار این و اون. نه می تونه خودش خوراک خودشو درست کنه، نه حوصله داره که بشینه کار کنه. اینه که دزدی پیش می‌گیره و ما همیشه در خفقان هستیم. (سرگذشت کندوها، ص ۵۴)

Meetings are held in all 12 cities of bees. At the meetings, some bees suggest that they should go back to their former home, but the younger ones do not want to return to the rural areas, preferring to stay in the city (where the garden is). Some bees have other ideas. They think that if their honey is being stolen by the disaster, they should let it be: “we don’t die of hunger, maybe there is a wisdom behind [the stealing of the honey]. We don’t need any honey in this season.”<sup>162</sup> The other bees do not listen to these resigned bees, but decide to move back to their former land. When Kamand Ali sees twelve groups of bees flying away from his garden, he is so shocked that he cannot do anything. His neighbors witness the remarkable scene, but also do nothing, except grin at each other and say: “Kamand Ali has become devastated.”<sup>163</sup>

In *The Tale of the Beehives*, the honey (representing Iran’s oil) is being stolen by the disaster (representing the British) and by the ants (representing the Pahlavi family). The meetings of the bees represent the meetings that took place among Iranian intellectuals about the nationalization of oil, the role of the king, Iran’s modernity, and the future of the nation-state. In the meetings, the bees note that it is impossible to overcome the ants because they are so many and so adept at entering the beehives: “even if we secure all the corners and the holes of the beehives, again they will find a way to come inside.”<sup>164</sup> One of the older bees, whose name is Shabaji, says:

We know what kind of bastard this ant is. Neither our sting works on his body nor because of our dignity will we leave our work and our life to go and fight with it. And they are not one or two that we would be able to fight. And if we fight together, for one of us there are hundreds of them.<sup>165</sup>

Shabaji very specifically describes the reasons that the bees cannot defeat the ants in war. She continues to assert that the ants cannot do anything but steal, signaling that there is no point in trying to change the ants or reason with them:

An ant is created to steal and go inside the store of other people. It cannot produce food nor has the patience to work. For this reason, he is busy with stealing. So now we know all about the ants.

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<sup>162</sup> Al-e Ahmad, 70.

ما که از گشنگی نمیبریم. آخه اونم لابد حکمتی به کار شه. ما هم تو این فصل ناز و نعمت احتیاجی به ذخیره و آذوقه نداریم.

<sup>163</sup> Al-e Ahmad, 70.

<sup>164</sup> Al-e Ahmad, 62.

<sup>165</sup> Al-e Ahmad, 62.

Finally, Shabaji explains that there is no way to get rid of the disaster. It is not known to the bees what the disaster does with the honey he steals and why he needs more and more of it, but it is clear that both the ants and the disaster “are ... disastrous for our lives.”<sup>166</sup>

*The Tale of the Beehives* shows, in the form of a national allegory, how Iran’s intellectuals came together and achieved self-identification during the period of the nationalization of the oil industry. It emphasizes that the intellectuals were divided, but presents a happy ending in which all the bees, no matter whether they agreed with emigrating or not, unite and leave together. Oil nationalization would be the real-life equivalent of this departure from the garden, but was more difficult to achieve, as it relied not only on the will of the Iranian people. Moreover, oil reserves, unlike honey, are not transportable and Iranians do not have a previous home elsewhere to return to.

According to Ghanoonparver, Al-e Ahmad failed in his attempt to push oil nationalization through this allegorical story, “because soon after, the West and the Western oil companies succeeded in reinstating their influence over that industry.”<sup>167</sup> He sees the departure of the bees as a false representation of what happened in the post-coup d’état era, “since the bees in the end free themselves from the exploiter, while in the mid 1950’s, when the story was written, the Iranians, unlike the bees, were not wise or orderly enough to liberate themselves.”<sup>168</sup>

I propose a different reading of the *Tale of the Beehives*, not as a failed representation of what actually happened, but as expressing a desire for things to have turned out differently, as well as a belief that a different outcome would have been possible if the Iranian people – and first and foremost Iranian intellectuals – had been more resolved to keep foreign powers out of the Iranian oil industry. According to this reading, the story makes two main points. Firstly, it indicates that there is hope for freedom and independence, and secondly, by foregrounding the efforts by the bees to challenge the “disaster” and the ants, Al-e Ahmad contends that the Iranian populace does not have to remain passive and should not be seen as stupid (as it is in Hedayat’s allegory); if they want to get rid of the British and the Pahlavi family, they can do so by banding together. In portraying the bees as returning to their old home, Al-e Ahmad is not advocating a return to the pre-oil pastoral lifestyle of the Iranians in the oil regions (and thus a potential undoing of Iran’s modernization); the story acknowledges

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<sup>166</sup> Al-e Ahmad, 62–63.

<sup>167</sup> Ghanoonparvar, “Oil and Persian Fiction,” 201.

<sup>168</sup> M.R. Ghanoonparvar, *In a Persian Mirror: Images of the West and Westerners in Iranian Fiction* (University of Texas Press, 2010), 210.

that such a return would be an unattractive prospect for the young and, as noted, it is also clear that such a return in reality would not be as straightforward as it is for the bees.

## Conclusion

The Iranian literature written about the early stages of petroleum modernity focused on the foreignness of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, which was interpreted sometimes (as in Bahar's first ode) as an advantage – a way of bringing modern achievements to Iran – but more often as something to be critiqued. The unfair oil agreements made between Iran and the British in this period angered Iranian writers and intellectuals. In this chapter I have argued that early Iranian literature about the oil encounter, which frequently took the form of an explicit national allegory, focused mainly on criticizing foreign involvement and did not deal with the specificities of the oil industry on the ground.

All three writers I have discussed criticized the foreign involvement in the petroleum extractions in the south of Iran. Their writings portray the British as greedy and as abusing the ignorance of the local Iranians hand in hand with the central state. As a constitutional poet, Bahar used the classic form of poetry to reflect on the oil encounter. His odes give voice to an idea that would become central to Iranian petrofiction: that the development brought by oil should be praised, while the involvement of foreigners in the oil industry should be cursed. Although in his early ode, Bahar praises the British for, together with the Iranians, implementing new technologies, his later ode is overtly critical of British interference in Iran and elsewhere. Bahar, who was a member of government, does not criticize the central state or Reza Shah. In contrast, Sadeq Hedayat chose an allegorical form that allowed him to express bitter criticism of both the Pahlavis and the interventions of the British and Russians. Hedayat's "The Case of the Anti-Christ's Donkey" claims that the British and Reza Shah colluded to entertain and distract local Iranians in order to make the process of stealing the oil easy and uncontested. Finally, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, who was a political activist and member of the Tudeh Party, and who actually visited the oil regions, not only wrote a factual report detailing the exploitation of the local oil workers, but, in *The Tale of the Beehives*, also produced an allegory that encourages the Iranian people to organize a unified uprising to reclaim ownership over the oil.

All three writers discussed in this chapter were based in Tehran, at a distance from the oil region and with no or only intermittent experience of what was going on in these regions as the company towns were being built. While Bahar and Al-e Ahmad did visit the petroleum

region, their literary works are more engaged with making the general point that petroleum as a substance is being stolen from the nation, with the profits going to foreigners, than with the precise ways in which the AIOC was extracting the oil and treating the workers. Hedayat's perspective is the most distanced and it is perhaps because of this that he puts most of the blame on ordinary Iranians, depicting them as stupidly allowing themselves to be robbed by the Pahlavis, British, and Russians.

These two stories, produced by the writers whose main concern was Iran's position as a nation-state, can be considered as early national allegories. Both stories are looking at Iran as a state that should be independent and defended from foreign forces such as the oil company. Both stories portray Iranians as inferior citizens, belonging to what resembles a "third world" country in Jameson's sense, who should fight to overcome foreign oppression. As it appears in these stories, national allegory concerns a commitment to a nation's people's own will and wishes, and advocates an active resistance to outside threats and (semi)colonial extraction.

In the early decades of the oil industry, as I have shown, oil appeared in Iranian literature mostly allegorically or metaphorically as "black gold," "stolen gold" or "national heritage"; it was not concretely engaged with as a substance and an industry. In the next chapter, I will show how the growth of the oil company towns of Abadan, Ahwaz, and Masjed Soleyman prompted literary representations of oil in a socialist realist mode that allowed a much closer engagement with the materiality of oil and the labor conditions offered by the oil industry. The setting of the stories is no longer Tehran, and the characters do not stand in for the oil company and its stakeholders; rather, they are people who work in the industry whose lives are shaped by their status as oil workers and by oil as a visible, touchable, and understandable substance.