



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Crude oil and its false promises of modernization

Petroleum encounters in modern Iranian fiction

Khoshnevis, R.

Publication date

2021

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Khoshnevis, R. (2021). *Crude oil and its false promises of modernization: Petroleum encounters in modern Iranian fiction*. [Thesis, externally prepared, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Chapter 3

The Era of Petroleum Struggle: The Stories of Ahmad Mahmoud, Naser Taqvayi, and Mohammad Reza Safdari

The previous chapter discussed petroleum fiction prior to the 1953 coup d'état, which relied on the image of oil as Iran's "stolen treasure" and the "people's capital." After the denationalization and coup d'état, this "stolen treasure" took on a different shape in both social reality and literature. Between the coup and the Iranian Revolution, petroleum was conceived as an invisible and mysterious substance, which was generating profits for national elites and international companies at the price of the blood and sweat of the local people. The image of petroleum in Iranian fiction shifted from that of a "glittering stone" to that of a "blackened snake" slithering through the streets of the shantytowns that made up the suburbs of the oil company towns.

This chapter analyzes fictions representing the oil nationalization period from the early 1950s until the late 1970s. These fictions focus on confrontations between westerners and locals in the petroleum towns of Abadan and Ahwaz, and feature locals questioning the presence of westerners in Iran and the existence of segregated living districts. The works written in this period are among the most politically engaged works of modern Persian literature, belonging to what is referred to by literary critics as "committed literature"¹⁶⁹ and portraying the rise of nationalist movements that combined anti-colonial and anti-imperialist ideas. Iranian literature of this era was heavily influenced by leftist propaganda literature and social realism. The latter, which was already a known and established genre in modern Persian literature, was newly used to reflect on the unfolding of the petroleum encounter in Iran's oil towns.

Persian literature has portrayed westerners in different ways throughout its history. In the introduction to *Persian Mirror: Images of the West and Westerners in Iranian Fiction*, M.R. Ghanoonparvar notes that in classical Persian literature the term "foreigner" (*farangi*)

¹⁶⁹ Talattof, *The Politics of Writing*, 66.

was used to refer to infidels, non-Muslims, and Christians and Europeans, but that its use changed later on:

Two Persian terms, *farang* and *farangi*, have been in use in Iran for many centuries. Etymologically “France” and “French” respectively, in the past *farang* and *farangi*, often rather vague usage, have commonly referred to the people and lands of Christendom, generally including Byzantium. In recent times, particularly since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, these terms have gradually acquired less ambiguous meaning and are used to refer to the West and Westerners in general, more specifically to the lands and people of Europe and North America.¹⁷⁰

Ghanoonparvar emphasizes that foreigners were represented, from the 18th century onward, differently in literature from the provinces on the shores of the Persian Gulf than in literature from the center of Iran. He also notes that, during the 20th century, depictions of foreigners in Iranian literature mostly depended on the relationship with the British. It was in this century that Iranians became suspicious of the British, a suspicion that governs most of the politically engaged literary works written in Iran. If, before this, the image of foreigners in Iranian literature was often vague and unrealistic, after the oil encounter portrayals became more detailed, especially in considering their presence in the southern provinces.

The image of the foreigner became even more negative after the failure of oil nationalization and the American engineering of the 1953 coup d'état. Ghanoonparvar gives the example of two anti-western writers, Al-e Ahmad (discussed in the previous chapter) and Saedi, and notes:

...it should be kept in mind that anti-western sentiments of the kind discussed here do not stem from a sense of hatred for the Other, in this case, the West. Rather, they should be viewed as Iranian reactions to the Western cultural and political threat, the purpose of which is ultimately self-production and the preservation of their cultural and political identity.¹⁷¹

What here is called “anti-western sentiments” mostly pertains to the British masters in the oil company and is described from the workers’ point of view. As explained in the previous chapters, after 1953, literature was one of the only platforms where Iranians could express their anger at the semi-colonial situation of their country. In addition, Ghanoonparvar mentions that the strength of the anti-western sentiments expressed depended on the specific attitudes of the

¹⁷⁰ M.R. Ghanoonparvar, *In a Persian Mirror*, 2. I choose to use the word “foreigner” instead of “westerner” to translate “farangi” because not all foreigners in oil company towns were from western countries. Indians were the second-largest foreign community in the company towns and people from other countries, such as Iraq and Armenia, also lived there.

¹⁷¹ Ghanoonparvar, 80.

writers, which “differ from region to region and period to period and are inevitably linked to the writer’s own background and experience.”¹⁷² He also believes that, “literary artists in every society are at times the unwitting victims of the propaganda of the regime in power. Once writers accept or reject the notions that a government tries to inculcate into the people, their work can be regarded as a reaction to such propaganda.”¹⁷³ In this case, the notions the government tried to inculcate into the people were being rejected by many writers, especially those in the southern region. These writers turned the inequalities between westerners and locals in the oil company towns into the main theme of their literary works.

Another reason for the rise of anti-western Iranian literature in this period can be found in the influence of the Tudeh Party and social realism. Negative images of foreigners were highly controlled and censored by the central government in the years after the coup d’état. Any anti-foreign aspect in a literary text was considered an act of communism. Nonetheless, although the Tudeh Party was disbanded after the 1953 coup and its members were imprisoned or exiled, its ideas remained popular among writers. In fact, as I wrote in the first chapter, many writers from before the coup d’état, from Jalal Al-e Ahmad to Ebrahim Golestan, had been members of the Tudeh Party. Writers and intellectuals were attracted by the party’s Marxist anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism, and its involvement in cultural activities. The Party ran several journals and periodicals. The writers associated with the Tudeh Party were attracted by the social realism genre, which was influenced by the Cuban and Chinese revolutionary style that reached Iran in the late 1960s.

This chapter focuses on the works of the three abovementioned writers, who were highly active in this era: Ahmad Mahmoud (1931-2002), Naser Taqvayi (1941-), and Mohammad Reza Safdari (1952-).¹⁷⁴ Of these writers, Ahmad Mahmoud is the most engaged with socialist realism. Mahmoud, as the most famous writer of the Iranian petroleum encounter, describes the encounters of locals with petroleum in a socialist realist manner by focusing on realistic details and guiding the reader towards the reasons for the workers’ rebellious actions. Taqvayi and Safdari, on the other hand, are less engaged with committed literature and socialist realism, instead occupying themselves with the artistic aspects of storytelling such as form, imaginative language, and poetic point of view. As for their involvement with the Tudeh Party, only Mahmoud was, for some time, an official member.

¹⁷² Ghanoonparvar, 9.

¹⁷³ Ghanoonparvar, 10.

¹⁷⁴ It should be noted that writing about the problem of petroleum and choosing the petroleum regions as the setting for fiction was very fashionable in this era. There are many literary works which refer to the problem of petroleum and encounters between foreigners and locals encounters from these years.

All three authors' works seek to convey the perspective of the Iranian locals who rebelled against the failure of oil nationalization and continued to struggle to make it a reality. They portray the locals as challenging the interfering presence of westerners (mostly the British) in their daily lives. Although Mahmoud's, Taqvayi's, and Safdari's narratives highlight the pervasive presence of a sense of hopelessness and nihilism, they also show that the locals continued to hope for change and acted to bring it about. Hence, the texts emphasize how the workers from the shantytowns became political activists. Having been forcibly modernized by the oil industry, they pushed for a radical transformation that would put the control of this industry into the hands of the Iranian people. More specifically, I will show how these literary works seek to make readers familiar with the construction of ethnicity-, gender-, and class-based identities in the suburbs and shantytowns of the oil company towns of Ahwaz and Abadan, in response to the violence exerted by the petroleum industry on the local residents and workers.

I will start by discussing two stories by Naser Taqvayi, "Ashura in Autumn" and "The Summer of That Year," which are about the conflicts in Abadan around the time of oil nationalization (1951-1953). Then I will discuss the representation of petroleum in three works by Ahmad Mahmoud, called "The Little Native Boy," "Our Small Town," and *The Neighbors*, which exemplify the prominence of the petroleum struggle in the committed literature of the time. Finally, I analyze two stories by Mohammad Reza Safdari, "Siasanbu" and "Akusia," which present a post-Revolution perspective on the petroleum struggle.

"Ashura in Autumn" and "The Summer of That Year" by Naser Taqvayi

*You, all the ink-fish of all the seas, give your ink. You, all the birds of all the skies, give your kind feathers. You, all the shrouds of all the martyrs, spread your whiteness. But you, all the historians of the history of the world, never imagine that you can recount the life of Khorshidu.*¹⁷⁵

Born in 1941, Naser Taqvayi was a well-known Iranian filmmaker, director, scriptwriter, and teacher who believed that his passion for cinema and literature resulted from being born and raised in Abadan. He was the first writer of Iranian petrofiction educated in the Abadan schools established by the oil company and had first-hand experience of living next to the Abadan refinery. Similar to his fellow writers and translators from Abadan, such as Najaf Daryda

¹⁷⁵ Naser Taqvayi, *Tabestan-e Haman Sal (The Summer of That Year)* (Entesharat Loh, 1969), 52. All quotations from Taqvahi's stories were translated by me.

Bandari and Safdar Taqizade, he felt that he had learned more from going to the cinema than from attending school. In the 1950s and 1960s, the cinema was one of the main places to go for the Abadani youth. Taqvayi was especially influenced by American films, which were shown in different cinemas in Abadan upon release.¹⁷⁶ When he moved to Tehran in the late 1960s, he began to work as an assistant to Ebrahim Golestan at the Golestan Film Workshop.¹⁷⁷ From 1965 to 1968, after returning to Abadan, Taqvayi was the co-editor in chief of the magazine *Art and Literature of the South* (1966-1967), while also working as a writer and editor. Later, he became an official employee of Iranian National Television, directing several documentaries and drama series. His most famous drama series was *My Uncle Napoleon* (1976), which mocked a retired Iranian officer who had been part of the allied forces during WWII.

Taqvayi's first feature film was *Tranquility in the Presence of Others* (1970), which made him internationally famous. In 1988, he won the Golden Leopard at the Locarno Film Festival for *Captain Khorshid*, an adaptation of Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Not Have*. Taqvayi's films were at the forefront of Iran's new wave cinema. His writing style, as he himself admitted, was indebted to Hemingway, who was among the most translated writers in Iran during the 1960s and 1970s. In 1969, Taqvayi published *The Summer of That Year* (*Tabestan-e Haman Sal*), the collection of short stories on which I will focus in this section.

The stories in *The Summer of That Year* represent the daily lives of low-ranking workers at the Abadan refinery. According to Al-e Ahmad, Taqvayi's collection is one of the earliest Iranian literary works dealing with conditions for laborers in industrial workplaces. In an interview, Taqvayi himself noted: "Before my stories, the stories were all about traditional professions, but I wrote about industrial workplaces such as oil companies and harbors in the south of Iran."¹⁷⁸ The way the workers use their leisure time and their interactions with their foreign masters are the main themes with which the stories in *The Summer of That Year* engage.

All eight stories in the collection, the title of which refers to the summer of 1953, are about workers at the Abadan oil refinery. They express their sense of hopelessness and of lacking a purpose in their lives and careers, but also narrate their transformation from low-ranked workers into political activists, many of whom are arrested or killed. The first six stories show the growing tension between foreigners, workers, and Iranian supervisors. Westerners are inactive in these stories, but they nonetheless cast a shadow over the workers' lives as they

¹⁷⁶ Ahmad Talebinejad, *Be Ravayat-e Naser Taqvayi (According to Naser Taqvay)* (Tehran: Zavesh, 2012), 24.

¹⁷⁷ Talebinejad, 25.

¹⁷⁸ Talebinejad, 23.

pass them in the street or drink beside them in the local café. The characters are portrayed as spending their time predominantly in three places: the refinery, Garagin's café, and Zheni's brothel. While the workers have to spend most of their time in the refinery, working for their Iranian and British masters, the supervisors and bosses spend their ample leisure time in the café and brothel.

Zheni's brothel plays an important role in raising the tension between the workers and their supervisors and bosses, as the women working there take on all three groups as customers. The café belongs to the Armenian Garagin, who also serves everyone. While the café is mainly a leisure destination, it is also a meeting place where locals develop ways to survive outside the oil industry. In the first story in the collection, "Bad Day," the oil worker Khorshidu ends up in the café after having a fight with the doorman of the harbor who controls the workers' ID cards. Because of this fight, Khorshidu gets fired. The second story, "Between Two Rounds," is again set in Garagin's café and features Khorshidu waiting for the rain to stop so that he can smuggle some workers to Kuwait during the night, by boat.

The stories show the negative emotions of the workers towards the oil industry and emphasize how they are struggling to improve their situation. The first six stories are connected and feature the same characters; together, they offer an account of how the dissatisfaction of the workers with their poor working conditions builds up to a rage that fuels them to go on strike. The strike and its aftermath are the subject of the two final stories in the collection, which ends with the workers' disappointment in the failure of their uprising.

The penultimate story, "Ashura in Autumn," stages a struggle between the police and the oil workers in one of the alleys in Abadan. The story begins with Garagin attaching a poster to his café window of a beautiful woman selling a strong raisin vodka. While Garagin is attaching the poster, he sees soldiers chasing a group of shroud-wearing workers who are all running in one direction. That the workers are wearing shrouds is a sign of their resistance and shows that they are ready to die for the cause. Taqvayi sketches the historical background in the first paragraph of the story:

The whole time when Davud was drinking in silence with a pale face, the shadow was going up from the wall on the other side of the street, and was hiding the sunshine. In that time of the summer, in the heat of the last day of Mordad (August), the darkness was coming early.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ Taqvayi, *The Summer of That Year*, 51.

This informs readers that the story is about the last days of Mordad and thus about the coup d'état, which took place on 28th Mordad (August) 1953. An earlier story in the collection describes the departure of the foreigners and their families from the harbor after the coup.

In "Ashura in Autumn," Garagin, witnessing the striking workers being chased, is terrified and feels that everyone in the street is looking at him. Then he sees Khorshidu, wearing a long white shroud and standing, spellbound, in the middle of the street. Khorshidu is looking at Garagin when a group of soldiers reaches him, but instead of looking back at him Garagin is hiding inside his café, his view of the street blocked by the poster of the woman in the window:

Garagin did not ever see Khorshidu, who was behind the flyer of the beautiful woman advertising strong vodka. But when he was hiding behind the bar, he could hear the sound of dry leaves beneath the boots of the soldiers, which was similar to the sound of broken bones.¹⁸⁰

In this scene, the narrator obliquely informs the reader, through describing the sound of the leaves being crushed by the soldiers' boots as similar to that of bones being broken, that the soldiers kill Khorshidu.

At this point, the narrator inserts two poems into the story, interrupting the prose narrative and reflecting, in bold print, on the oblique manner in which Khorshidu's death has been presented, through the ears of the cowering Garagin. The first poem admonishes historians for being unable to capture what happened to Khorshidu:

You, all the ink-fish of all the seas, give your ink. You, all the birds of all the skies, give your kind feathers. You, all the shrouds of all the martyrs, spread your whiteness. But you, all the historians of the history of the world, never imagine that you can recount the life of Khorshidu.¹⁸¹

In this poem, the lyrical I addresses the ink-fish of the seas and the birds of the sky, and calls on them to witness this scene. The lyrical I asks these creatures to offer their most important possessions – their ink and their feathers – in order to record the scene in writing, while the shrouds of the martyrs are asked to spread their whiteness in order to provide a writing surface. The lyrical I finally addresses the historians and makes clear that, unlike the ink-fish, birds, and shrouds, they will remain unable to recount the life and death of Korshidu. In this manner, the poem asserts that this tragic incident is beyond the ability of historians to represent because it does not follow the logic of official historiography.

¹⁸⁰ Taqvayi, 52.

¹⁸¹ Taqvayi, 52. As noted, these lines are bold in the original text.

After this poem, the narrator returns to the story and the café, telling us that Garagin eventually comes out of hiding. When he tries to pull the shutter down, the shroud-wearing Davud, who has escaped the soldiers, comes inside. At this point, the narrator emphasizes that time is passing very slowly. Both Garagin and Davud silently wait, with Davud sipping his drink. Then, another poem appears, again printed in bold:

The Leopard is out of the cage finally. To see the light of the brightest star. It is a starry night. The leopard has put all his effort into making the highest jump. A leopard, for his highest jump, in a night full of stars toward the brightest star... is shot in the air. The gaze of the hunter, The gaze of the eyes of the leopard, The hunter is afraid and says to himself: Be calm you stone! If he wasn't shot, he could make it this time.¹⁸²

The leopard represents Khorshidu, who dies by the shot of the hunter – the soldier. He is shot during his highest jump towards the stars. This jump refers to Korshidu's attempt to achieve something extraordinary in standing up to the oil company and the state. The poem heroizes Khorshidu by comparing him to a leopard who has escaped his cage and is aiming for the stars. However, the soldiers act out of fear and kill him in order to prevent the uprising of the workers from succeeding. This uprising, the poem suggests, took all the effort of the workers and scared the regime into violently repressing it. The soldier/hunter shoots the workers/leopard because he knows that if he did not shoot, the workers would win the war to improve their working conditions and change the power dynamics governing the city of Abadan and Iran as a whole.

By inserting these two poems into the narrative, the narrator conveys two messages: first, that the story of the uprising and Korshidu's death cannot be told in the traditional historical form and, second, that it is only possible to tell this story through the language of poetry. No historical references to this strike exist, but if the incident did occur, it must have happened between 1951 and 1953. According to Abrahamian, in *Iran between Two Revolutions*, the Tudeh Party did lead a series of strikes against the oil industry beginning in March 1951.¹⁸³ At the end of "Ashura in Autumn," Davud leaves the café without saying anything and Garagin closes up after him. As he does this, he notes that the woman in the vodka advertisement is laughing at him. This laughter can be interpreted as an indictment of his cowardly behavior in hiding behind the bar when Khorshidu was being killed, but it also draws attention to the general non-involvement of women in the petroleum struggles of the time.

¹⁸² Taqvayi, 54. The lines are bold in the original text.

¹⁸³ Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton University Press, 1982), 367.

Taqvayi describes the aftermath of the events in “Ashura in Autumn.” This final story in the collection centers around Ashur, one of the workers who participated in the strike and was arrested and imprisoned.¹⁸⁴ Ashur has been released and is trying to get back to his previous work in the harbor of Abadan. He and his friends look for a new place to gather together to drink and smoke, and they find a quiet place near the harbor:

we were sitting in a corner. There were four more tables. At every one of them three to four men were sitting. Most of them were harbor workers. They sat quietly gazing at their glasses, as if they had forgotten how to blink. When they were young, sitting quiet was the sign of being very drunk, while shouting was a sign of not being very wasted.¹⁸⁵

After the August incident, the harbor workers, who make possible the export of the oil, realize that they are becoming old very fast. Their new habits in the café, sitting in silence and sipping their drinks very carefully and patiently, are the habits not of young people, but of elders, who are no longer likely to get very drunk or to rebel. Ashur, when he looks into a mirror, meets the eyes of a man with white hair at his temples despite only being in his thirties: “if it wasn’t for those lines in his forehead, he wouldn’t recognize himself.”¹⁸⁶

It is not just Ashur’s appearance that has changed, but also his behavior. When he sees police guards in the streets, he becomes nervous and “his steps were getting unrhythmic.”¹⁸⁷ He and his friends try to go to Zheni’s brothel, but instead of just enjoying himself with the girls, Ashur falls for one of them and asks her to marry him. This is extremely unusual, as Zheni’s girls are not for marrying, but for spending one night with to forget about the difficulty of the work in the harbor.

When Ashur returns to the refinery, he sees that nothing has changed. The refinery is the same as it was before. The work is still difficult, the head-workers and masters are still brutal, and there are still foreign ships exporting the petroleum. The narrator describes the workers’ disillusionment and realization that their rebellion has not had any effect, other than to change them and age them prematurely:

We heard that everything was in order. But when we returned, we saw that nothing was in order. In the humid mornings we were coming to work, and were sitting, without any word, similar to strangers. We had the feeling that so many things had changed, but in fact nothing had changed. The people were the same, the cranes were the same, and the ships were the same. [The ships] had come again and were queued next to the harbor. Like a chain. And the lemon color of the

¹⁸⁴ The 1953 coup d’état took place on the 19th of August, which in the Persian calendar is the 28th of Mordad 1332. In the story, there is no reference to this specific date, only to the last days of the Mordad month.

¹⁸⁵ Taqvayi, *The Summer of That Year*, 58.

¹⁸⁶ Taqvayi, 59.

¹⁸⁷ Taqvayi, 59.

water was moving beneath the ships. In the bend of the river, the end of the chain was in a very thick fog, and sun was coming from the same spot in front of the palm groves.¹⁸⁸

It is very painful for the workers to see that their sacrifices have been for nothing. Resistance, death, and imprisonment have not led to any improvements in their lives or changes in how the oil industry works; it has only made them strangers to each other and unlikely to stand up for themselves again. They end up sitting in the café and filling their leisure hours with drinking and smoking in order to forget.

At the end of the summer, when the narrator returns from a summer vacation, he sees a black ambulance in the refinery:

Between two half-ton of steel sheets, there was clotted blood. And from under the lower sheet, a pair of boots peeked out. The shoe sole was open, and the nails were visible, sitting next to each other like a row of teeth.¹⁸⁹

This is the scene that reveals that Ashur has died working in the harbor. In it, the narrator questions how it is possible for someone who has escaped all the deadly incidents recounted before only to die in the workplace. The other workers wash Ashur's blood from the steel sheets and the harbor keeps running as if nothing has happened: for the oil industry, Ashur's life is expendable; another worker can simply replace him.

Taqvayi's collection of stories is the first in Iran to explicitly address the growing tensions between the local workers and the state, as the latter refuses to improve the formers' lives. Resistance, in Taqvayi's stories, does occur but turns out to be futile, as the workers end the collection dejected and resigned to their hard lives and the daily risk of ending up dying on the job like Ashur. Taqvayi's collection is an important work of Iranian petrofiction because, first of all, it foregrounds the experiences and frustrations of the oil workers, most notably regarding their lack of job security, their inadequate living spaces, their poverty, and the dangerous working conditions. Second, it makes clear that women, too, are affected by the oil industry. Taqvayi's female characters are marginal: they are prostitutes, nurses, or even just images on a poster. They are not nearly as active as the male characters, in accordance with the general voicelessness of women in the petroleum cities, to which I will return in Chapter 6. Third, the stories' main locations – where the local workers, the Iranian head workers, and the westerners in charge all come to relax – show that despite efforts to keep the different groups

¹⁸⁸ Taqvayi, 58.

¹⁸⁹ Taqvayi, 60.

apart, they did encounter each other; it was in these meeting zones that tensions between them came to a head and workers planned protests.

The state's – and, by extension, the oil industry's – control over every aspect of the workers' lives, including the location and quality of their living quarters in the petroleum cities, becomes even more tangible in the stories of Ahmad Mahmoud. While Taqvayi focuses on the tensions between the workers in the oil company towns and the foreigners running the oil industry as they erupt in the public spaces of the street, the café, and the brothel, Mahmoud takes readers into the private spaces of the workers, telling the stories of locals who live in the suburbs of the oil company towns of Ahwaz and Abadan. It is on Mahmoud's petrofictions that I will focus in the next section.

“The Little Native Boy,” “Our Small Town,” and *The Neighbors* by Ahmad Mahmoud

Arezu says that foreigners believe we are “qorbati” (strangers), they say we are wild...¹⁹⁰

Ahmad Mahmoud was born Ahmad Ata in 1931 in Ahwaz, the capital of Khuzestan province, to a large, lower-middle class family. His father was a building contractor who had occasional contracts with the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Mahmoud joined the Tudeh Party in his late teenage years and was arrested after the coup d'état of 1953. He spent five and a half years in prison before being exiled to Lenge Port (Bandar-e Lenge), a poor and outlying port in southern Iran. He was released from exile in 1957 (1331) and returned to Ahwaz. Mahmoud began to write short stories during his time in prison and exile. His first short story, “It Will Be Morning” (“*Sobh Mishe*”), was published in the magazine *Omid-e Iran* in 1955. Later, he published three collections of short stories: *Mul* (1957), *The Sea is still Calm* (*Darya Hanooz Aram Ast*, 1960), and *Futility* (*Bihudegi*, 1962). Mahmoud became a famous writer following his first novel, *The Neighbors* (*Hamsaye-ha*), the most popular socialist-realist novel of modern Iranian literature, published in 1974. Due to his criminal record and lack of education, however, he never found a proper job and switched between different careers for about twenty years. He moved to Tehran after the Revolution of 1979 and dedicated his life to writing. In 1982, he published *The Scorched Earth* (*Zamin-e Sukhte*), one of very few novels written about the first three months of the Iran-Iraq War, set in Ahwaz.

¹⁹⁰ Ahmad Mahmoud, “Pesarak-e Bumi” (“The Little Native Boy”) in *Az Mosafer Ta Tabkhal* (*From Traveler to Herpes*) (Moein Publishing Center, 1992), 255. All quotations from Mahmoud's stories were translated by me.

This section analyzes three fictional works in which Mahmoud follows the protagonists' lives in the suburbs of Ahwaz and Abadan. The stories are told from the point of view of a boy as he learns about life. By choosing this perspective, the stories cater to the under-educated and unaware citizens that are Mahmoud's implied readers. The boy from whose perspective the stories are told also represents all the workers who do not grasp the exact situation by which they are oppressed. In "The Little Native Boy," the protagonist is a teenager called Shahru. He lives in the oil company town of Abadan and is in love with the daughter of a British employee of the APOC. A very similar but younger character appears in "Our Small Town," now named Khaled. He lives with his family in the shantytown of Ahwaz, which is about to be destroyed by the oil company in order to build houses for the workers of the company. Khaled and his family become displaced after being forced to leave their homes. In *The Neighbors*, the protagonist is again Khaled, now in his teenage years. In this novel, Khaled learns that all this misery can be attributed to the British. He becomes a member of the Tudeh Party and, after the coup d'état of 1953, spends his late teenage years in prison and exile, returning to his city only as an adult.

The main subject of Mahmoud's stories is what Ellen McLarney has called, on the basis of readings of novels revolving around oil in the Middle East such as Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* (*Rijal fi Al-Shams*, 1963) and Abdul al-Rahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* (*Munun al-Milh*, 1984), the "mechanization of human life."¹⁹¹ The stories reveal how the lives of ordinary people in the oil towns were experienced as split between modernity and tradition, as involving simultaneously living in the past and in the future.

Mahmoud is known as a socialist-realist writer who was seeking to awaken the masses. The socialist-realist literary movement in Iran was preoccupied with opposing the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and focused on the failure of the oil nationalization projects and the coup d'état of 1953. Mahmoud's representation of the ambiguities of life in an oil company town, as well as of the inability of the locals to fully grasp the process of colonial industrialization they were being subjected to, make him one of the most important writers of Iranian petrofiction. Years before "petrofiction" became a fashionable term, Mahmoud was known among Persian literary scholars as able to grasp how oil worked as both a commodity and the primary catalyst for cultural production in Iran's company towns. He specifically represented life in the shantytown suburbs of Ahwaz and Abadan, as well as the workers' rebellion of 1953. Poverty, tensions between locals and foreigners, and migration are the main subjects of his

¹⁹¹ McLarney, "Empire of the Machine," 177.

stories. His texts offer a highly realistic representation of the Iranian people's relationship to oil, with Mir'abedini proclaiming Mahmoud the literary voice of Southern Iran.¹⁹² In an interview with Leili Golestan, Mahmoud emphasizes that his stories all have a connection with Khuzestan and the problem of oil:

First of all, I have spent my youth, teenage time, and my childhood in Khuzestan; Second, the problem of oil, migration, and migratability of Khuzestan, industry and agriculture, the full rivers, huge palm groves, diverse people who had come from different parts of the country are merged there together. Third, I know Khuzestan very well. Even though I have lived in Tehran for a long time, I know Khuzestan better. I have never cut my connections to Khuzestan.¹⁹³

In this section, I will analyze Mahmoud's petroleum stories "The Little Native Boy," "Our Small Town," and his novel *The Neighbors*, focusing on how they portray the transformation of local Iranians by their interaction with the petroleum industry. Besides showing how the tense relations between locals and westerners fostered by the segregated way in which company towns were set up transformed the stories' protagonists into political activists, Mahmoud also turns the socialist-realist genre into an anti-British genre in *The Neighbors*.

"The Little Native Boy" ("*Pesarak-e Bumi*") is about social and racial inequality. It reveals the influence that segregated company towns, shaped by inequality, exert on relations between foreigners and locals, creating tension and resentment. It also makes clear how each group felt about the towns and the oil company. The story takes place during the 1950s, at a time of heightened emigration to Abadan of Iranians looking for work in the oil industry, when the company could not provide proper housing facilities for the waves of workers flowing in. As Kaveh Ehsani notes: "The large number of contract labors were not regarded by the company as its responsibility and lived in shanty towns on the edges of company and municipal areas."¹⁹⁴ The fact that foreign workers were living in bungalows while many Iranian workers lived in provisional housing (and sometimes even in oil pipes) eventually led to strikes.

Abadan is an island in southwestern Iran. While the oil extraction sites were in the northern mountainous province of Khuzestan, Abadan was the chosen setting for the refineries.

¹⁹² Hasan Mir 'abedini, *One Hundred Years of Iranian Storywriting*, 165–66.

¹⁹³ Leili Golestan, *Hekayat-e Hal: Goftogu ba Ahmad Mahmoud (Hekayat-e Hal: A Talk with Ahmad Mahmoud)* (Moin Publish Center, 2004), 28. The translation of this paragraph is mine.

اول اینکه من، جوانی، نوجوانی و کودکیم را در خوزستان گذرانده ام. دوم اینکه به نظر من، جنوب و بخصوص خوزستان سرزمین حوادث بزرگ است. مساله نفت، مساله مهاجرت و مهاجر پذیری خوزستان، صنعت نفت و کشاورزی، رودخانه‌های پر آب، نخلستانهای بزرگ، آدمهای مختلف که از اقصی نقاط مملکت آمده اند و در آنجا با هم امتزاج پیدا کرده‌اند سوم اینکه جنوب را خوب میشناسم، علی رغم این که این همه مدت در تهران زندگی کرده‌ام هنوز جنوب را بهتر میشناسم، پیوندم را با جنوب قطع نکرده ام.

¹⁹⁴ Kaveh Ehsani, "Social Engineering and the Contradictions of Modernization in Khuzestan's Company Towns: A Look at Abadan and Masjed-Soleyman," *IRSH* 48.3 (2003): 361–99.

The first refined oil shipment left from Abadan in 1909 and the city was constructed around the refinery to house the employees and workers of APOC. Two sections next to the refinery, Braim and Bowardah, were chosen to house foreign employees. Braim was separated by the refinery from the “native town” or “city,” where the Iranian workers lived.¹⁹⁵

Ehsani, a historian of the early decades of the Iranian oil industry, refers to Abadan in its early years as a “filthy boomtown” that was “devoid of most elementary public infrastructure such as latrines, clean water, safe and sufficient food supplies, and [had] a minimum of decent housing for the general population.”¹⁹⁶ He also notes that it was a “highly segregated town.”¹⁹⁷ Nonetheless, Abadan is known as the first modern city of Iran. The part of the city reserved for foreigners tried to provide for their needs by establishing clubs, cinemas, swimming pools, restaurants, and supermarkets.

In “The Little Native Boy,” Shahru, the teenage son of an oil worker, goes to the foreigners’ district of Abadan every day to see Beti, the daughter of a foreign family who lives in the company district of Bowardah. Shahru sits in front of her door, waiting for her to come out and shake hands with him or smile at him. As there are no walls between the houses and streets in the Bowardah district, Shahru is able to observe the lives of the foreigners in their gardens. He is even able to smell their food. While waiting, Shahru argues with the district gardener, an Iranian who is among those who go to the mosque and believes strongly in God’s will. The gardener tells him that Shahru should not visit every day and stare at the foreigners’ houses. He compares Shahru to a faithful dog waiting for his masters, who are tired of scaring him away. He believes that Shahru, “as a naked-ass son,”¹⁹⁸ has no business interacting with the daughter of a foreign family.

The division between foreigners and locals was the main characteristic of Abadan, as it was in other colonial and semi-colonial cities around the world. Ehsani describes how Abadan was full of invisible borderlands between the formal and informal parts of the town, which were locations of great tension. The gardens and verandas of the houses of the foreigners exemplify such a borderland. The function of the veranda as a borderland or meeting zone is revealed in David Malouf’s *12 Edmondstone Street* (1985):

A veranda is not part of the house. Even a child knows this. It is what allows travelling salesmen, with one foot on the step to heave their cases over the threshold and show their wares with no embarrassment on either side, no sense of privacy violated.... Verandas are no-man’s-

¹⁹⁵ I will discuss Abadan and its company district in more detail in Chapter 6.

¹⁹⁶ Ehsani, “The Social History of Labor in the Iranian Oil Industry,” 287.

¹⁹⁷ Ehsani, 304.

¹⁹⁸ Mahmoud, “The Little Native Boy,” 133.

land, border zones that keep contact with the house and its activities on one face but are open on the other to the street, the night and all the vast, unknown areas beyond.¹⁹⁹

In Malouf's novel, the veranda is a place where the owners of the house can meet strangers without feeling that their privacy has been invaded. Bill Ashcroft uses Malouf's explanation of the function of the veranda in his chapter "Excess, Post-colonialism and the Verandahs of Meaning" in *De-Scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality* (1994) to explain the notion of the meeting zone. According to Ashcroft, the veranda is a "bi-focal"²⁰⁰ place between the home and the outside. It is the meeting zone of the familiar and the strange.

In Mahmoud's story, the front yard of Beti's house acts as a such a meeting zone. In this bifocal space, Beti is the insider and Shahru the outsider; their worlds come together when they meet. Bungalows in Abadan had verandas and also front yards with low fences which could be looked over from the alley. For this reason, Shahru, who is standing in the alley, does not have to step into the garden or onto the veranda to have access to what is happening in Beti's garden. Being able to see into gardens from the street was very rare in Iran's high-walled culture, in which the insides of homes were traditionally kept secure from prying eyes, but the western-style bungalows in the company districts were more accessible.

In Abadan, the foreigners' part of the city was where the native people were supposed to be silent; the accessible yards were the only place in which they were allowed to communicate with the foreigners. Shahru knows that he cannot step beyond this meeting zone, and there are even restrictions for accessing the meeting zone. The gardener is allowed inside the garden, but Shahru is not; he can only watch the garden from the outside. The meeting zone for Shahru, therefore, is restricted to the street, from which he is allowed (but, given the gardener's comments, not encouraged) to watch the life of the foreigners while keeping a specified distance. He waits for the rare opportunity to interact with Beti, which happens at a rudimentary level as they do not speak the same language. Beti also shows an interest in him, but her mother, witnessing their interaction, quickly calls her inside. The gardener warns Shahru on many occasions that he will tell Beti's father that Shahru is sitting in front of their house and looking at the garden. Shahru insists that this is not an illegal act, but the gardener makes clear that if the foreigner becomes annoyed by his presence, he can easily fire Shahru's father and get rid of him that way.

¹⁹⁹ David Malouf, *12 Edmondstone Street*, New Ed edition (Vintage, 1999), 22.

²⁰⁰ Bill Ashcroft, "Excess: Post-Colonialism and the Verandahs of Meaning," in *De-Scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality* (Routledge, 1994), 42.

By focusing on the time Shahru spends near the meeting zone of the garden, the story is able to provide the reader with many details about the lives of foreigners in Abadan: their clothes, their cars, the way they treat their dogs, and the color of their skin. The story highlights that all foreigners have small aviaries in their front yards, which are designed with a lawn and a swing. These front yards smell of roasted vegetables, butter, and freshly watered grass. Observing all this, Shahru feels as though he is no longer in the south of Iran, but has been displaced to the western, developed world. He watches Beti's family come out of their house to feed their dog, sees that they have water piped into their gardens for the lawn and plants, and notes that, when Beti's father, who wears shorts and has skin as red as the meat of a deer, comes home in the evenings, he wets himself with cold water or waters the grass.

Shahru's father belongs to Howze, a cell of the leftist Tudeh Party in Abadan. At this point, the party has not yet been banned and they can freely organize meetings. Shahru accompanies his father to the meetings and listens to the speeches given by cell members. The discussion is about workers who live in oil pipes, having nowhere else to live. Arezu, one of the speakers, talks about the upcoming elections for the 14th Parliament and announces that Howze will have an election meeting on Friday in the main square of Abadan. Arezu says that foreigners believe "we are 'qorbati' [strangers], they say we are wild..."²⁰¹ Shahru is too tired to listen to Arezu carefully; all he hears are angry sentences full of the word "foreigners." The next day, Shahru and his friend Suri go fishing at the Bahmanshir River. On their way there, Shahru stops by Beti's house. Beti walks out and Shahru takes her to the bridge. He draws a picture of a fish in the sand and they both laugh. To learn how to speak to her in her language, Shahru wants to go to a school for seniors (*Akaber*). Meanwhile, he ponders Arezu's contention that "it is all the fault of foreigners"²⁰² that the people go hungry and do not have proper housing and living conditions. Shahru wants to spend more time with Beti, but at the same time he has been told that foreigners like her are the enemies of the workers. "Damn foreigners"²⁰³ is a sentence repeated many times in the story by anti-foreign activists. It expresses the local people's resentment of the fact that they are dependent on the foreigner-run oil industry to make their lives flourish.

The meeting zone of the bungalow garden is what allows the locals to see the huge inequality between the foreigners' lives and their own. For example, when Shahru lies on the cement bridge under the sun and looks at the water tank and the sky, he knows that the water

²⁰¹ Mahmoud, "The Little Native Boy," 255.

²⁰² Mahmoud, 255.

²⁰³ Mahmoud, 168.

in the tank is out of reach for him. Foreigners have access to clean water, but the locals do not. Although Shahru watches Beti's family and eagerly imagines being part of their life, he understands that this will never be possible because he will never be seen to belong with them.

When Shahru goes back to his side of the city where the shantytowns are, he sees the oil pipes in the distance, with lights hanging on them. The pipes are not yet being used by the refinery, which is why the homeless workers are able to live in them. These squatted pipes resemble the "native quarter" of the colonial cities that Frantz Fanon describes in *The Wretched of the Earth*. He describes the desperate situation of the locals in these towns as follows:

They are born there, it matters little where or how; they die there, it matters not where not how. It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other. The Native Town is a hungry town.²⁰⁴

This matches what Mahmoud tries to show his readers in "The Little Native Boy." Shahru belongs to a part of the city that is crowded and dirty. It does not have asphalted streets, piped water, or electricity. Although this part of the city is put in the service of the refinery, just as the part of the city reserved for foreigners, Crinson calls them "ill matched twins," to indicate the coexistence of two binary opposed worlds in one place.²⁰⁵ When Shahru returns to his own district, it seems like he is entering another world that does not smell of nice things like Beti's neighborhood, but of fish kebab, the sea, and oil.

Remembering the speeches at the Howze meetings about the foreigners and their broken promises to the workers who flowed into Abadan from all over Iran leads Shahru to become a political activist. In his mind, he reviews the lives of the people he knows. He remembers Arezu saying: "you can see that many people are getting used to live in the pipes, step by step. And this is a way of keeping people satisfied. They are satisfied because they don't pay rent and there is a roof over their head."²⁰⁶ Angered by this, Shahru dreams of using a gun to take on the gardener and the foreigners, but he also worries about Beti, whom he cannot see as just another "damn foreigner."

One morning in another part of Abadan, the big city square becomes a meeting place. The gathering is for the 14th Parliament elections, which were held in 1941. Blue-collar workers are gathered to announce their expectations of the new parliament. Waves of people enter the square waving flags and signs. The main speech by Arezu is about the election, workers'

²⁰⁴ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Grove Press, 2007), 39.

²⁰⁵ Mark Crinson, "Abadan: Planning and Architecture under the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company," *Planning Perspectives* (2010): 341–59.

²⁰⁶ Mahmoud, "The Little Native Boy," 144.

salaries, and how the oil industry is exploiting local workers. During Arezu's speech, the workers' anger flares up when he talks about the workers' inadequate living areas and specifically the workers living in the oil pipes. The meeting becomes more and more crowded, and all the workers are pressed closely together when Arezu stops his speech. Suddenly, the sound of a gunshot is heard and people start saying that the party headquarters have been looted. Shocked by the gunshot, the crowd starts leaving the square by entering the street known as the "oil road," which leads to Bowardah, the foreigners' district of Abadan. It seems that the people in the crowd outnumber the soldiers who shut down the street earlier. Shahru's father tries to send him home, but Shahru is worried for Beti and goes with the crowd.

When the crowd, shouting "damn foreigners,"²⁰⁷ moves towards the houses in Bowardah, a car is spotted and people run after it. Shahru, recognizing that the car belongs to Beti's family, yells out, "No!" When Beti steps out of the car, suddenly the car is set on fire. Shahru runs towards the car to save Beti, but in the midst of the chaos, more petrol is poured on Beti and Shahru. Both catch fire and, in the words of the narrator, "the smell of burned flesh is mixed with the salty smell of sea and oil."²⁰⁸ The two teenagers in love burn together in the flames stoked by the anger of the local people about their exploitation by the oil industry.

The car also works like a meeting zone/borderland: it moves between different parts of the city and does not respect the lines and borders between areas for foreigners and areas for locals. However, it is a meeting zone/borderland that is more difficult to control than the garden or veranda, as the story's ending shows: when the car encounters the crowd, it cannot escape and as soon as Beti exits the car, she is at the mercy of the crowd's anger. In this story, in addition to highlighting the inequalities of oil company town life, which, for Shahru and Beti, prove insurmountable (they can only be together in death, not in life), Mahmoud also reveals the tension between the fascination the foreigners' lives hold for locals like Shahru and their indignation about how they and other locals are treated by the foreigners. The story shows how leftist speeches turn Shahru from a naïve teenager into a political activist, but it also underlines how this political activism comes at the cost of the potential for a more equal relation between locals and foreigners, as prefigured by Shahru and Beti's budding romance.

The story's mixing of social realism with a romance that ends in tragedy results in an ambivalent ending. The two lovers, who stood for the different worlds existing within Abadan, end up killed by the protestors. Beti has become part of the shantytown in that she now smells

²⁰⁷ Mahmoud, 168.

²⁰⁸ Mahmoud, 170.

like it, of sea and oil. Significantly, the story's ending can be read in multiple ways. On the one hand, it can be read as suggesting, through Shahru and Beti's joint demise, that both foreigners and locals are victims of the inequalities produced by the oil industry. On the other hand, the story could also be read as an indictment of romanticizing relations between locals and foreigners, of believing, like a naïve teenager, that these relations could ever be different without structural changes to the organization of the oil industry. The real resistance, then, is located not in the love story, but in the story of the mobilization of the crowd and its anger. From this perspective, the story stresses that it is a necessity for the local workers to educate themselves, to participate in meetings and organizations, and to rise up and struggle against the current situation, even if this results in deaths.

The distressed relationship of the locals with place and with the oil industry in company towns is also represented in another story by Ahmad Mahmoud called "Our Small Town" ("Shahr-e Kuchak-e Ma," 1971). This story takes place in the early days of the construction of company houses for the oil industry in the city of Ahwaz, the capital of Khuzestan province which is located in north east of Abadan. "Our Small Town" depicts the very first days of the introduction of oil to the city and its main theme is the displacement of locals due to the city's forced industrialization, as well as the locals' reactions to this displacement. The main character of "Our Small Town" is Khaled, who is living in a poor suburb of Ahwaz in a house that is about to be demolished by the oil company. His is a crowded neighborhood located near a palm grove. One day, people sent by the oil company come and chop down the high palm trees behind Khaled's house. They flatten the earth and pour sand and oil on it to make it ready for the construction of oil company houses and offices. Khaled describes how "they were hundred men, or hundred and fifty who came early in the morning with their heavy axes, and in the sunset, it seems that there was never a palm grove behind our house."²⁰⁹ The first creatures that are un-housed are the little sparrows whose homes were at the top of the palm trees. As the nests fall to the ground, Khaled thinks about robbing the eggs from them. However, as demolition continues to happen around their house, he gradually realizes that his home is also under threat, putting him in the same position as the swallows. This equivalence to the swallows is reinforced by the fact that Khaled is also a pigeon keeper, with a loft at the top of the house. When the discussion about vacating their houses arises between the neighbors, Khaled, as master of his pigeons, feels he is losing his pets. In a meeting with the other men of

²⁰⁹Ahmad Mahmoud, "Shahr-e Kuchak-e Ma" ("Our Small Town"), in *Gharibe-ha va Pesarak Bumi (Strangers and The Little Native Boy)* (Amir Karbi, 1977), 89.

the district, he vows to protect his pigeons: "...If they destroy our house... if they destroy my loft...no..."²¹⁰ The displacement of the swallows and the potential displacement of the pigeons is metaphorically linked to the displacement of Khaled and his neighbors, marking it as an act of violence.

Eventually, the whole neighborhood is displaced. Displacement, as it has been theorized within cultural studies, is not only about people who have to leave their homeland because of war, famine, drought, or poverty; it is also about forced changes in a homeland which fundamentally alter one's relation to place.²¹¹ Reasons for such domestic displacement include the acts of colonizers and the forced industrialization and semi-colonization of petroleum companies, such as in Iran, Nigeria, and New Zealand.

Mahmoud's story can stand next to the work of Abdulrahman Munif and Ghassan Kanafani in describing the ruthlessness of the petroleum industry in the Middle East. Besides the physical displacements it effected, "Our Small Town" also draws attention to what McLarney calls the "mechanization of human life."²¹² For her, this is the main subject not just of Arab oil novels, "but also American, Latin American, and African oil novels, as particular locales become retrospectively valorized as sites of cultural origins."²¹³ These sites of cultural origins are the pre-industrial towns, landscapes, and ways of life that, in the stories of Munif, Kanafani, and Mahmoud about the petroleum regions of the southern shores of the Persian Gulf, are destroyed by heavy machines and invasive technologies to make way for oil.

In "Our Small Town," the process of forced industrialization and modernization is described by referring to the alteration of the senses. The sounds, scents, and colors in Khaled's neighborhood change suddenly and irrevocably upon the arrival of the oil industry. Khaled is not only disturbed by the fact that the palm grove has disappeared, but also by a new, overwhelming noise in the neighborhood. This is the noise of the Feydus, the refinery horn that signals to workers that the shift is changing. Khaled describes this "shocking" sound as waking up everyone in the neighborhood, also those who do not (yet) work for the refinery.²¹⁴ The workers of the refinery also make the neighborhood smell different:

The blue-collar workers with their steel caskets and pots in their hands were coming to our street to go to their office, and lay down under the palm trees in front of a coffee house in front

²¹⁰ Mahmoud, "Our Small Town," 97.

²¹¹ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (Taylor & Francis, 2006), 345.

²¹² McLarney, "Empire of the Machine," 177.

²¹³ McLarney, 178.

²¹⁴ Mahmoud, "Our Small Town," 94.

of the river. This had turned [the river-side] to a kind of Bazaar and the air was filled with the smell of raw fish and the fiery smell of grilled fish with spices and the scent of homecooked bread with the acidity smell of sour yogurt and cooked meat and the heart and kidney of the cow, together with some herbs.²¹⁵

While the smell of the workers' food is not necessarily unpleasant, the pervasive smell of petroleum is: "The whole small streets of 'our small town' are filled with the smell of oil."²¹⁶ The new fragrance of the city, which leaves its people with no escape from the oil industry, gives Khaled a sense of displacement, of being separated from his past. The former palm grove and the Karun river are now separated by a wall made of yellow bricks. And the empty land behind this is similar to "a yellow color wound"²¹⁷ that will not heal and that does not allow the former scent of the Karun river to enrich the neighborhood any longer. The green color of the palms has been transformed into the yellow of disease.

Oil, in this story, is the enemy; its industry has spoiled the atmosphere of the town. Khaled sees the oil pipes that now form the main infrastructure as two snakes, one male and one female: "Two strings of tar coated pipes, like male and female snakes have crawled from the margins of distant palms and reached the center of the city."²¹⁸ In Persian literature, snakes are symbols of bad luck. Thus, the story implies that, with the oil pipes, evil and misery now run throughout the town. These snakes reach the wooden oil-coated sticks which are located in the central square of the city and which are identified as gallows by Khaled, who is the narrator of the story. Khaled reveals his emotions about the new atmosphere of the city when he notes that "wherever the eyes went, there were the patterns of the tread of car tires on the oil-coated of streets."²¹⁹ He is referring to the cars that are transferring petroleum to Abadan and other refineries. With their tires, they are spreading lines of oil all over the city and the country, signaling the omnipresence of the oil industry and its power to radically change landscapes and lives.

There are rumors going around about new housing programs in the neighborhood. This time, the existing houses will be demolished and then reconstructed for the industry. Khaled whispers to himself: "this industry has an eating disorder. And he has opened his oily mouth and is eating the city bite by bite."²²⁰ Here, in the eyes of Khaled, the whole industry becomes

²¹⁵ Mahmoud, 94.

²¹⁶ Mahmoud, 94.

²¹⁷ Mahmoud, 93.

²¹⁸ Mahmoud, 93.

²¹⁹ Mahmoud, 93.

²²⁰ Mahmoud, 93.

هر جا که نگاه میکردی، نقش آج لاستیک ماشین بود که رو خاک ور آمده آغشته به نفت خیابانها نشسته بود

a huge monster with an eating disorder, in that it will never be satisfied what it consumes and is determined to absorb the entire city.

Again, Mahmoud's intention in telling this story is to warn people that they have to resist this forced industrialization. In "Our Small Town," the men of the district hold their first meeting secretly to speak about the radical changes that are occurring in the city. In the meeting, Noruz, one of the men of the neighborhood, grabs his pestle and mimes taking the invader's life. Musa, another neighbor, believes that they should raise their voices against the oil company and the foreigners stealing their homes. He says: "First of all, I will cut the head of that foreigner ear to ear."²²¹ He instigates all the men against the invaders. Meanwhile, one of the other men compares the situation to an epidemic disease like cholera: "it comes bit-by-bit... not everybody takes cholera together..."²²² They all agree that the situation is dire and vow to take action: "When they come to demolish our houses... we won't go for work... we will stay in the houses..."²²³

At the end of this story, it becomes clear that the strike is averted because someone alerts the police, who arrest the men and take them to the station. There, they promise to vacate their houses by the end of the week. Soon, the men of the neighborhood realize that revealing their rage in an effective way that would change the circumstances is almost impossible as the government and the oil company have left nothing but fear in the neighborhood. Besides being arrested by the police, the corpse of Afaq, the wife of Khaj Tufiq, is found in their yard. She had been working as a cloth smuggler between the shores of the Persian Gulf and was shot and killed by the guards of the river side of the city at night in the palm grove, where she was hiding her smuggled goods. This makes all the neighbors understand that resisting the changes and going against the government will not benefit them and that they could very well pay with their lives.

After the families vacate their houses, a bulldozer comes and destroys the properties with its sharp blade. The last people remaining are Khaled and his father, with their belongings in a gunnysack: "I put the gunnysack on the ground and looked at the pigeon who was holding its wings and flying over the wreckage of our house. Then it ascended and turned and turned. Like it doesn't know the house. Like it is a wanderer."²²⁴ They see the bulldozer destroy a bird's nest when it makes the roof collapse. A white pigeon flies over the wrecked house,

²²¹ Mahmoud, 93.

²²² Mahmoud, 93.

²²³ Mahmoud, 97.

²²⁴ Mahmoud, 100. A gunnysack is a very cheap sack made from jute fiber.

seemingly unable to find its way. In the last scene of the story, Khaled is standing with his belongings on his back, looking at the wrecked house and the homeless pigeons. The future of the displaced humans and birds alike is unknown and uncertain, as the oil industry gains more and more ground and power in the city of Ahwaz.

While this story describes the locals as fired up by anger, but ultimately forced by the police to give in and leave their houses, in Mahmoud's best-known novel, *The Neighbors*, he shows how the people were finally able to organize and resist the oil industry, and provides more details about the extent to which the oil industry dominates Ahwaz. Mahmoud began to write *The Neighbors* in 1963, ten years after the American-supported coup d'état of 1953. He finished the book in 1966, but was not able to get it published until 1974. In an interview with Leili Golestan, he refers to the fact that *The Neighbors* not only faced political obstacles, but was also "too long according to the standards of those days."²²⁵ The novel was first published in a limited edition, but banned before the second edition could appear as it propagated a leftist political ideology. In the chaotic times following the Iranian Revolution, the Amir Kabir publishing center printed the book in large numbers and it gained popularity. After this, the novel did not receive permission to be republished due to its containing "un-Islamic" erotic scenes, according to Mahmoud in his interview with Lili Golestan.²²⁶ *The Neighbors* was never published again in Iran, but was widely read as an illegal publication. Although Mahmoud was upset by the official bans on the novel, Golestan mentions that "the public acceptance of *The Neighbors* made Mahmoud think that he was entering a new stage in fiction writing."²²⁷ It gave him the feeling that he was responsible for writing in a way that could impact society.

The Neighbors can be seen as the first petrorealist novel in Iranian modern literature. This genre is defined by Brent Ryan Bellamy in *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy Environment* (2017), which is about new terminologies in the energy humanities. Bellamy defines "petrorealism" as comprising the use of "literary, cinematic, and gaming narrative forms, for example--as a way to mediate the scalar problem between thinking big and the specific situation and context of petromodernity."²²⁸ By "thinking big,"²²⁹ he is referring to the fact that problems as big as global warming and global pollution require "a solution-seeking adequate to the size of the problem."²³⁰ He argues that petrorealism is the sort of genre that

²²⁵ Golestan, *Hekayat-e Hal*, 44.

²²⁶ Golestan, 65.

²²⁷ Golestan, 43.

²²⁸ Brent Ryan Bellamy, "Petrorealism," in *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment*, edited by Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, and Patricia Yaeger (Fordham University Press, 2017), 260.

²²⁹ Bellamy, 260.

²³⁰ Bellamy, 260.

Amitav Ghosh intended petrofiction to be in his seminal essay “Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel.” According to Bellamy, the most famous petroleum fictions, such as Abdulrahman Munif’s *Cities of Salt* quintet (1984-1989) and Upton Sinclair’s *Oil!* (1927), are the best examples of petrorealism as they “elaborate the near omnipresence of oil in everyday life in an attempt to defamiliarize or to make strange our petrosubjectivity.”²³¹ By this he means that petrorealism gives readers ample details about living under the shadow of petroleum, thus making the invisible destructive acts of this substance as visible as possible. *The Neighbors* fits within petrorealism because it so successfully details the difficult reality of ordinary life lived under the shadow of petroleum. As such, it is what Bellamy calls one of “the actual accounts of the petro-present.”²³² Mahmoud’s socially committed novel presents the emergence of a political resistance movement among local Iranians living in the suburbs of oil company towns. It specifically covers the role the Tudeh Party played in such towns and their actions during the period of oil nationalization and the coup d’état of 1953.

The Neighbors was written in a period of modern Iranian literature dominated by “revolutionary literature.” In Talattof’s words, this was a time when Marxist ideology was being incorporated into novels, as “literary activists cherished the idea of writing a novel dealing with the theory of dialectical materialism, a work requiring a combination of realism and revolutionary romanticism, if an ideal guideline for actual life is to be created.”²³³ In line with this, Mahmoud’s novel not only voices the dialectical ideas of Tudeh, as disseminated in party literature, and delineates the actions of the party in oil company towns during the nationalization of the oil industry. The novel also refers to meetings and gatherings of the party in Ahwaz and Abadan, uses the coded language of the party members, and refers to actual party activists, even utilizing some of these activists’ famous quotes. However, Mahmoud has mentioned in different interviews that *The Neighbors* is not fully in line with the views of the Tudeh Party because, on various occasions, it includes criticism of the party’s decisions and ideology.

According to Abrahamian, strikes for the nationalization of oil – organized and managed by the Tudeh Party in Khuzestan – began in 1951: “Having organized strikes among silo workers and railway men in February 1951, the CCFTU burst into the political arena in

²³¹ Bellamy, 260.

²³² Bellamy, 260.

²³³ Talattof, *The Politics of Writing*, 76.

the following month by leading a series of strikes in the oil industry.”²³⁴ Abrahamian adds that “the call for general strike was heeded by over 65,000, including truck drivers, railway men, road sweepers, shopkeepers, bazaar craftsmen, and high-school students, as well as the 45,000 employees of the oil company.”²³⁵ *The Neighbors* tells the story of how the people’s growing discontent with the oil industry culminated in strikes in Ahwaz, as well as of how the oil nationalization movement collapsed by the time of the 1953 coup d’état. This period can be considered as the first oil war in the Persian Gulf, followed by the Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), and the Gulf War (1990-1991).

Khaled, the protagonist of the novel, is living with his family in a common house shared with neighbors. The story is set up as a continuation of Khaled’s story in “Our Small Town.” Khaled has grown into a young man who finds pleasure in the body of an older woman called Bolur Khanum, the wife of one of the neighbors. Struggling with poverty, Khaled’s father decides to go to Kuwait to find a job. The neighbors are not doing any better, with the exception of Bolur Khanum’s husband, who owns a teahouse. Khaled is not going to school anymore, partially because his father heard from Hajj Sheikh Ali that “too much schooling makes people unruly,”²³⁶ but mainly because of poverty.

One day, when Khaled is out with Ebrahim, one of the neighbors’ sons, they break the window of another neighbor. Khaled and Ebrahim are taken to the prison at the police station and spend one day there, which changes the path of Khaled’s life. Another man under arrest gives him the address of a bookstore and asks him to take a message to the storekeeper. After being let go, Khaled goes to the bookstore and finds some young adult men with big mustaches who are busy compiling illegal political publications.²³⁷ He tells them that one of their friends, Shafaq, has been arrested.

On another day, Khaled accidentally stumbles upon the same men in the Ahwaz Bazaar, spreading the illegal publications around. Khaled receives one of the publications and tries to understand what it says about what are to him mysterious and unrecognizable concepts such as oil, imperialism, and foreigners. Khaled ends up folding a small kite from the publication, signaling his inability to grasp its importance. However, it is clear that his teenage mind has

²³⁴ Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, 368. CCFTU is the abbreviation for the Central Council of the Federated Trade Unions of Iranian Workers and Toilers. در فارسی به نام شورای متحده مرکزی اتحادیه کارگران و زحمتکشان ایران شناخته میشود.

²³⁵ Abrahamian, 368.

²³⁶ Ahmad Mahmoud, *The Neighbors*, trans. Nastaran Kherad (University of Texas Press, 2013), 5.

²³⁷ Mustaches were a sign of membership of the Tudeh Party.

found something more interesting than Bolur Khanum. He tries to read and understand the publication:

I can't make any sense of it. Eventually I am able to spell out a word and read it, but I can't understand what it means. For instance, I can't figure out what kind of a beast this "bloodthirsty exploiter" is that feeds only on blood and has an appetite that is insatiable. I am sure there must be a reason for calling this exploiter "bloodthirsty." There's got to be a reason.²³⁸

The narrator highlights the illiteracy of Khaled and his class. There are words written on the paper which are unfamiliar to him and even when he can read them, he has trouble grasping their meaning, especially when they are used figuratively. This underlines the distance between the locals and not just the oil company located in their city, but also the oil nationalization politics of parties like Tudeh. While Khaled does not understand the meaning of *Este'mar*, which means colonialism, he does understand the meaning of *Khoonkhar*, which means bloodthirsty. Although he does not realize who or what the beast is, he draws the conclusion that it is an exploitative entity and that there must be a reason for calling it bloodthirsty. Khaled tries to learn more about this mysterious creature: "I manage to grasp a few things about this beast. For instance, I'm beginning to comprehend that it also sucks oil sometimes instead of blood; that clues me in as to why on some of the papers, instead of as 'bloodthirsty,' it's also described as 'oil-thirsty.'"²³⁹ It is at this point that Khaled begins to see that the exploiter is the oil company.

As he is trying to read and learn, his friend Ebrahim is doing the same and expressing his own point of view:

"It's better to suck oil than blood," Ebrahim says, blinking his ever-clammy eyelashes. He believes that if this beast indeed craves human blood, it must be really horrifying. I dart a glance at him. He has such a sallow complexion, as if he's rubbed a paste of water and turmeric onto his face and neck. "No, Ebram, it's not just that, there must be other things that we don't understand," I say.²⁴⁰

Here, Ebrahim concludes that if there is indeed a beast in Ahwaz, it would be better for it to crave oil than human blood, but Khaled corrects him by noting that that cannot be all; that there has to be more to it than merely keeping the beast from going after human blood by having it suck oil. Khaled is beginning to understand that if the same beast craves both oil and blood, that means that there is a connection between the oil industry and the colonial exploitation by

²³⁸ Mahmoud, *The Neighbors*, 59.

²³⁹ Mahmoud, 59.

²⁴⁰ Mahmoud, 59.

the British that the publication is trying to draw attention to, whose negative effects on the local population are inscribed on Ebrahim in the form of his sallow complexion, and on both friends in the form of their poverty and precarious living conditions.

Later, Khaled learns that criticizing the presence of the British in the city and the link between petroleum and colonialism is illegal. People go to jail just for talking or writing about these things. This is the reason that the oil tanker drivers gather every day in the coffee house to talk about it in private. As the struggle on the part of the workers for oil nationalization gains steam, Khaled notes that in the refinery, workers are beginning to stick tags onto their chests saying “Petroleum should be nationalized.”²⁴¹

Khaled attends the underground meetings of the Tudeh activists in Ahwaz and becomes active in spreading illegal publications from the bookshop. At first, he does not really know why he is doing this and the many political slogans appearing around the city confuse him. In the street, Khaled hears people talking about making the British leave the country and wonders what they are doing here in the first place.

While Khaled is learning about the oil nationalization movement, he also observes the reactions of others to it. Not all the oil workers who come to the coffee house believe that nationalization is possible. Khaled hears one of the workers tell the others that “you cannot play with a lion’s tail.”²⁴² The lion stands for the British. In reply, the man says: “The lion’s old now, man. His mane is falling out.”²⁴³ Khaled still does not understand and thinks to himself: “I don’t know what this lion thing is they’re talking about. I don’t understand how a lion could have anything at all to do with a white tag.”²⁴⁴ Here, he refers to the white tag that workers who are supporting oil nationalization have attached to their chest. Again, Khaled is unable to get to grips with figurative language. This suggests that in order to get the ordinary people of Ahwaz involved in the struggle for oil nationalization, it might be more effective to use more literal language (in line with the penchant for realism in the socially committed literature of the time). In addition to the workers who do not believe the British can be chased off, many local people also believe that even without the British running the refinery, nothing would change because “we’[d] still [be] struggling to make a hole in the butt of a needle.”²⁴⁵ This points to the idea that Iranian control of the oil company might not work either, because

²⁴¹ Mahmoud, 66.

²⁴² Mahmoud, 66.

²⁴³ Mahmoud, 66.

²⁴⁴ Mahmoud, 66.

²⁴⁵ Mahmoud, 67.

of the incompetency of the Iranian regime and because of the fact that the lives of the workers might still be equally impoverished.

In portraying Khaled's involvement with the pro-nationalization activists and, through his eyes, the responses of the workers and locals, many of whom remain skeptical about what the movement can achieve in the face of the oil industry and the British running it, Mahmoud's novel paints a nuanced picture of this period in Iranian history. At the same time, *The Neighbors* shows the omnipresence of oil in the lives of the ordinary people of Ahwaz, like Khaled and his family. Although mostly invisible to him, as he does not work in the industry, oil plays a significant role in all the events of Khaled's life. His family's extreme poverty is a consequence of his father's profession as a blacksmith vanishing due to the emergence of modernized industries. Before his father goes to Kuwait to find work there and send home money, they are living off borrowed money from other poor neighbors. However, it is also the oil industry that rescues the family, as it is in the Kuwait oil industry, which is in desperate need of workers, that Khaled's father finds employment. In this way, the novel represents the double bind the oil industry puts the locals in: their lives are made worse by it, but they are also dependent upon it for their survival.

To help his family, Khaled starts to work at Aman Aqa's teahouse, which is on the way to Abadan and has many oil tanker drivers as customers. He uses the teahouse to spread the illegal publications produced by the activists. The teahouse becomes more crowded when Aman-Aqa brings in a radio broadcasting news of the oil workers' strikes and their suppression by the government. The inability of the Iranian government to control the oil workers is taken by some as evidence that Iran, in general, would never be able to run the oil industry as efficiently as the British. This internalized feeling of inferiority also exists in other petroleum fields. Khaled's father sends a letter from Kuwait that states: "... there is money to be made in Kuwait, but with humiliation... you must presume that the Arabs are the servants of the Frangis, and you are the servant of the Arabs."²⁴⁶ It is the engrained sense of being meant to serve the colonizers and their representatives (the Arabs or Iranians supervising the low-level workers), Mahmoud's novel suggests, that makes it more difficult for political movements like that initiated by the Tudeh Party to succeed.

Over the course of the novel, oil becomes the center of Khaled's attention. He turns into a dedicated activist against the foreign running of the oil company, a position he shares with many others in Ahwaz. They all demand oil nationalization. "The exploiters and the

²⁴⁶ Mahmoud, 98.

colonialists always dig their graves with their hands,”²⁴⁷ the students of the schools say while standing on the corner of the streets. The traders of the bazaar, in turn, state: “The days [in] which we wanted a guardian [are] over. Now we are mature. And we have the capacity too. We have to throw all the British in the sea.”²⁴⁸ Together with his fellow activists, Khaled ends up participating in one of the strikes for oil nationalization:

There are all kinds of people in the square, all mixed together. Oil company workers in blue, railway workers with their muscular bodies and sunburned faces, textile workers with their pale skin, high school kids, office staff, bazaar merchants, women, old, and young people. The middle-aged man speaks. The subject is oil and the colonialists. “We demand that the hands of the plundered be removed from our country.”

Thousands of voices rise up and shout.

“Yes!”

“We demand Bread instead of cannon.”

“Yes!”²⁴⁹

In this scene, the solidarity between various workers, including those not working for the oil company, becomes clear. In the square, the protestors shout: “do not allow oil dealers to exploit our national wealth!”²⁵⁰ Then there is suddenly the sound of a gunshot, followed by two more. The crowd panics, the banners come down and, in the blink of an eye, the sky is full of colorful pamphlets. The nationalization effort fails and many people are arrested. After a while, Khaled is also arrested and put in prison for trying to spread flyers among the workers of an oil company. In prison, he is tortured and placed in solitary confinement in order to get him to betray his friends. He knows that the only way to get out of prison is to deny everything. After some days, the guards send him to a regular cell. The rest of the novel deals with Khaled’s time in prison, emphasizing the resistance and solidarity of the prisoners in the face of their dispossession.

The Neighbors is one of the most-read novels of modern Iran and has long been a manifesto for activists and leftists. The novel presents a realistic account of the gradual transformation by adherents of the Tudeh Party of locals in oil company towns into political activists committed to oil nationalization. The petroleum encounter in this novel appears in the form of the locals’ emerging awareness of the colonial nature of the oil industry, their attempts to stand up against the British, and the Iranian government’s suppression of these attempts.

²⁴⁷ Mahmoud, 139.

²⁴⁸ Mahmoud, 154.

²⁴⁹ Mahmoud, 145.

²⁵⁰ Mahmoud, 145.

As a writer who spent most of his life writing about oil company towns, Mahmoud, in all three texts discussed here, represents the petroleum encounter in a socialist realist manner from the locals' point of view. Through the experiences of his main protagonist, who grows from a teenager into an adult over the course of the stories and novel, Mahmoud emphasizes that the locals are not just hostile to the foreigners, but also fascinated by them, and that not all locals believe that resistance against the foreign ownership of the oil company is likely to be successful or, even if it were, likely to improve their living and working conditions. This ambivalence of the locals towards the foreigners is most tangible in "The Little Native Boy," in which the anti-British uprising is narrated from the point of view of Shahru, a local teenager who has a love-hate relationship with the foreigners in Abadan. Shahru travels between the two parts of the strictly segregated city, but his attempts to build a relationship with the British Beti are cut short by the growing movement against the foreigners, of which Shahru has himself become part. The tragic death of both Beti and Shahru at the end of the story, in the midst of a workers' protest, underlines the volatility of encounters between locals and foreigners in the meeting zones of Abadan, and makes clear that for both Beti and Shahru it is ultimately impossible to cross over to the other side.

In "Our Small Town," the oil encounter is presented as a struggle over the space of the city, with the oil company appearing as a gluttonous monster eating up whole neighborhoods in its drive for modernization. The story stresses the loss and displacement this involves for locals like Ahmad, whose everyday life becomes suffused with the smell and taste of oil, and whose family home ends up demolished. The locals are seen to discuss and protest the encroachment of the oil company, but their resistance is easily broken by the authorities arresting them and forcing them to vacate their homes.

In *The Neighbors*, the petroleum encounter is portrayed through the story of the gradual transformation of a local boy with little awareness of how the oil industry has impacted his city and country into a political activist committed to fighting for oil nationalization. In this novel, Mahmoud tackles the question of how locals should be educated about the problem of oil dependency and the oil industry's colonial organization. His answer is that this should happen in a way that considers the locals' illiteracy; complex figurative descriptions should be avoided and the problem should be identified in as straightforward language as possible. Mahmoud's own writing follows this policy: his stories do not contain poems imaginatively configuring the relationship between Iran and Britain, as Taqvahi's do, but remain in a realistic, literal register in order to educate and politically mobilize readers.

In the next section, I turn to Mohammad Reza Safdari, who, in two stories written after the Iranian Revolution, mixes reality and imagination to highlight the normally unseen aspects of the struggles between locals and foreigners in company towns during the years of struggle for oil nationalization.

Mohammad Reza Safdari's "Siasanbu" and "Akusia"

*Foreigners are everywhere and whenever their flower (Pinus) grows, they break into people's houses and sleep on top of women, and do whatever they want. This is a master-less country and everything is in a total mess.... One night they came to the Slumdog. It was four of them and all were drunk.*²⁵¹

"Siasanbu" and "Akusia," published in 1979, are among the early stories of Mohammad Reza Safdari. Born in 1953 in a small town in southern Iran's Bushehr province, Safdari is one of the major writers of post-revolutionary Iran. He graduated in Dramatic Literary Studies from Tehran University and retired after a long career as a high school literature teacher. He began his teaching career in the rural areas of southern Iran, about which he also wrote fiction. Although he never worked in the oil industry or lived in oil company towns, the oil encounter is nevertheless a central theme in the two stories I will discuss here.

Safdari is among the writers whose stories were not easily granted publication rights by the Ministry of the Culture and Islamic Guidance. In an interview, he explains that many of his stories were heavily censored and therefore not really worth publishing.²⁵² He began to write stories when he was teaching in the villages of Bakhtiary ethnic groups in the northern parts of Khuzestan Province. He published his first story, "Night Gathering" ("*Shab Neshini*"), in 1975. "Siasanbu" and "Akusia" first appeared in the seventh volume of the magazine *Ketab-e Jom'e* in September 1979, just a few months after the Iranian Revolution. However, Safdari had to wait for fourteen more years before receiving permission from Vezarat-e Farhang va Ershad-e Islami (Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance) to publish the whole collection of stories. Later, he became famous for his 2002 novel *I Am Not a Tiger, Twisted Around Myself, I Am a Vine* (*Man Babr nistam, pichide be balaye khod, Takam*), which is about life in one of the remote villages of south Iran.

²⁵¹ M.R. Safdari, *Siasanbu va Dastan-Haye Digar (Siasanbu and Other Stories)* (Amut, 1989), 26. All translations from this volume by Safdari are mine.

²⁵² "Moradi Kermani: Dastan-hayam free size ast/ Ashk-haye Mohammad Reza Safdari." *ISNA*, accessed November 23, 2013, <https://www.isna.ir/news/92090200679/>-های-اشک-است-سایز-است-اشک-های-محمدرضا-صفدری

Ketab-e Jom 'e was a left-wing magazine that lasted for less than a year (July 1979-May 1980). The chief editor was the renowned poet Ahmad Shamlu, while the writers were leftist socialist intellectuals. *Ketab-e Jom 'e* used the open atmosphere of the first year after the Revolution to publish 36 issues, conveying the passionate anti-Shah and anti-American atmosphere of the time. Today, *Ketab-e Jom 'e* is famous for its sketches and images, as well as for its cover photos, which were influenced by the surge in interest in modern visual art during the 1970s. The magazine used both words and images in order to be more effective in conveying its ideas to the masses. Many of the artists behind the images remained anonymous,²⁵³ but it is known that *Ketab-e Jom 'e*'s modernist and surrealist covers were sketched and designed by the modernist artist Alireza Espahbod (1951-2007).²⁵⁴

In the years after the Iranian Revolution, the west and westerners became the main subjects of revolutionary art. Paintings and sketches helped the revolutionaries to convey their messages more easily to illiterate parts of Iranian society. Revolutionary art demonizing the west was fully supported by the central government, which had turned the west into the main enemy of Iran, called "Big Satan." It was at this time that revolutionaries were keeping fifty-two American diplomats hostage in the US embassy in Tehran and that street-art and wall-writing became popular among revolutionary activists. Ghanoonparvar describes the situation as follows:

With the 1978-1979 Islamic Revolution and the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty, there was no longer any obstacle for Iranian writers in speaking and writing openly about the connections between the Pahlavi regime and the Western powers, and even identifying the shah and his government as their agents in Iran. The anti-Western slogans of the revolutionaries and the revolutionary government since the beginning of the Islamic upheaval in Iran were in themselves clear enough signals to writers to now openly express their anti-Western political views in fictional and nonfictional forms, and also to blame the West for the atrocities of the overthrown dictatorial regime and its feared SAVAK secret police in addition to the threat to the Iranian and Islamic traditional values and the way of life that the "Westernized shah" had brought about.²⁵⁵

As Ghanoonparvar indicates, while anti-western and Islamic literature became the mainstays of post-revolutionary Iranian literature, leftist literature was limited to the early months of the post-Revolution period, after which it was suppressed. *Ketab-e Jom 'e* was among the magazines which had to fold after less than a year of publication because of their leftist points

²⁵³ Some of the sketches are by Bijan Jazani, who was a major figure in the Iranian People's Fada'i Guerrillas, and who was executed in 1975 in Tehran.

²⁵⁴ Hengameh Fouladvand, "ESPAHBOD, ALI-REZA," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, 2016, accessed May 10, 2021. <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/espahbod-ali-reza>.

²⁵⁵ Ghanoonparvar, *In a Persian Mirror*, 107.

of view. Because *Ketab-e Jom 'e* never received official permission for publication in the first place, it was unable to challenge its suppression. As Mohamad Qa'ed writes in *Nafe Magazine*: “in May 1979 I heard that police (*Dezhban*) had seized the magazine in train stations and decided to ban the publication and because *Ketab-e Jom 'e* did not have permission for publication nobody could go and ask for the reasons of the seizures.”²⁵⁶

In this section, I will argue that – in the two stories by Safdari – the relationship between foreign managers and low-ranking oil workers is portrayed as comparable to the colonial relation between European masters and local natives. The stories emphasize the brutality and violence that accompanies petroleum extraction in a country such as Iran. It should be added that, in writing these two stories, Safdari was greatly influenced by the anti-western sentiments of the post-Revolution period. As a result, the stories represent a kind of writing that is not necessarily historically accurate, but that conveys the intense anger that Iranian locals felt about the semi-colonial characteristics of the oil industry.

“Siasanbu” and “Akusia” are two connected stories set in the Abadan oil refinery, with low-ranking workers living in the shantytowns as the main protagonists, after whom the stories are named. The names “Siasanbu” and “Akusia” are commonly used to humiliate locals of south Iran who have a darker skin tone. These locals are descendants of African slaves who were transported to the shores of the Persian Gulf in the late 18th and early 19th century; they worked for Iranians until the abolition of slavery in the 1840s by the Qajar dynasty.²⁵⁷

In “Siasanbu,” Alseno is a low-ranking worker at various Abadan construction sites where houses of the foreign employees of the oil company are being built. He has custody of his nephew and his brother’s wife. His brother was a sailor who drowned at sea, so, according to custom, Alseno married his sister-in-law and took in her child. From the beginning of the story, the reader feels that the atmosphere of Abadan is not suitable for a woman of honor like Alseno’s brother’s wife who wants to work in the Bazaar. The company town, full of foreigners, is not a safe place for women, who are perceived as under constant threat of sexual assault: “Foreigners are everywhere, and whenever their flowers (penises) grow, they sleep on top of women, they break into people’s homes, they do whatever they want. This is a master-less country and everything is a total mess.”²⁵⁸ With the phrase “master-less country,” Safdari

²⁵⁶ “Qaed: Tatili Ketab Jom'e Khod Khaste Nabud,” *Tarikh Irani*, 2011, accessed March 30, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/vkr5ejpk>. The translation is mine. *Tarikh Irani* is a website that posts selected articles and essays about the modern history of Iran previously published in different paper-based magazines or newspapers.

²⁵⁷ Behnaz Mirzai, “African Presence in Iran: Identity and Its Reconstruction,” *Outre-Mers. Revue d'histoire* 89, no. 336 (2002): 229–46, <https://doi.org/10.3406/outre.2002.3991>.

²⁵⁸ Safdari, *Siasanbu and Other Stories*, 26.

refers to the fact that, with the oil industry in foreign hands, the affairs of Iran are not in the hands of Iranians.

The sketch shown in Figure 3.1 is the first image that accompanies the story in *Ketab-e Jom'e* and pictures the shantytown of Abadan.



Figure 3.1: *The shantytown of Abadan, in Siasanbu and Other Stories, p. 26*

The picture shows little houses that, according to the story, are made of tin and cardboard. Each house harbors one family and after work all the families gather in the common area between the houses. On an afternoon when Alseno and his neighbors are resting, they see four foreigners coming into their neighborhood. The narrator tells Hasan, Alseno's nephew, that:

Your uncle [Alseno] became conscious for a second and looked into the darkness. He saw that foreigners kicked the door of a shanty, seeing that it was empty. They whispered while cursing, and came to the back of your shanty. Before your mom found a second to escape, the fat one got her hand and twisted it. Alseno got involved. The chubby foreigner pulled out his wallet. "Money, money, I'll give you money. Just for one night."²⁵⁹

The foreigner is there to buy sex. He shows his money to Alseno and tries to buy Alseno's wife. Alseno cannot control his rage:

For a second, they thought Alseno was not there. They were stuck between going or staying, and Alseno returns with a brazier full of fire, throwing it on the foreigner's head. Maybe you heard their cry for help. It was in that moment that Akusia [Alseno's friend] brought a stick and beat them, in order to kill them.²⁶⁰

Throwing a brazier full of fire over the head of the foreigner is a daring act and everyone believes that, after this act, Alseno and his family will not be able to stay in the shantytown. By burning the foreigner, who needed to be taken to the hospital, Alseno has made the

²⁵⁹ Safdari, 27.

²⁶⁰ Safdari, 27.

shantytown unsafe. However, because the foreigners themselves were acting illegally in trying to buy sex, they cannot officially charge Alseno. This does not mean he has got away with his act of defiance, as the narrator makes clear that the police and the foreigners, hand in hand, are now waiting for a suitable moment to take revenge on Alseno and Akusia.

This part of the story shows the gender violence the petroleum industry has brought to Abadan. Safdari introduces the foreigners as rapists of Iranian women, painting them as infidels who do not understand the difference between a wife and mother, and a prostitute. Notably, he ties the foreigners' lack of respect for Iranian women to the colonial nature of the oil company. The word "*Tajavoz*," which is used in the above passage, means not only rape and sexual assault in Persian, but also violation, attack, and offence; it is commonly used to refer to the violation of the borders and gates of a land with the aim of occupying it.

Although Alseno and Akusia know the police and the foreigners are after them, they have no choice but to return to their work at the construction site. The houses being built there are not enough for all the foreigners coming to Abadan. According to the narrator:

white and red foreigners attacked the south like Egyptian grasshoppers. Whenever a ship came to the shores, or an airplane landed in the airport, you could see them get off the deck, two by two, flock by flock. They came with women and children, all of them red and tall. Taking a good look at them, they looked like turkeys without feathers. The ones that had cameras took pictures of barefoot, sunburned little boys, whispering something and laughing out loud. And now, Alseno was making houses for them.²⁶¹

The foreigners are presented here as an unstoppable pest descending on Iran, as treating Iranians with condescension, and as having comfortable houses constructed for them while the locals live in shantytowns like the one pictured in Figure 3.1.

One day, the burned foreigner and his friends come to the construction site to exact their revenge. Alseno is melting bitumen in the barrels, which are placed on top of a fire, when the foreigners arrive at the site. They reach Alseno and fasten him to the bitumen barrel next to the fire. When the bitumen begins to melt, the barrel gets hotter and hotter. Akusia comes to rescue Alseno, but is not able to reach him. While Akusia is struggling to reach Alseno, the foreigner with the glasses pours the bitumen over Alseno's head, as pictured in Figure 3.2.

²⁶¹ Safdari, 30.



Figure 3.2: Bitumen being poured over Alseno's head, in Siasanbu and Other Stories, p. 29

Alseno's scream carries throughout the construction site. In a second, the skin of his forehead has let loose and is hanging in front of his chest. He starts running around with his hands still bound. As everybody is screaming for "water!" the foreigners escape. The bitumen continues to burn but as it gets colder, it starts to squeeze Alseno's brain, killing him in an extremely painful way.

The stories discussed in this chapter so far have shown a certain distance between the locals and the foreigners working in the petroleum industry. In the fictions of Taqvahi and Mahmoud, foreigners were not directly involved in the deaths of locals (in fact, in one of Mahmoud's stories, it is a foreigner, Beti, who is killed by workers). The foreigners are hated and blamed for the bad living and working conditions of the locals, but most of the characters in the stories are lower-class workers, activists, and representatives of the Iranian regime (soldiers and police officers). In "Siasanbu," in contrast, the petroleum industry – and the foreigners it has brought to Iran – are no longer represented mainly by the smell of oil, but by the actual violence they wreak on the population, in person, though the near-rape of Alseno's wife and his brutal murder. Moreover, this is the first instance in Iranian petrofiction in which a worker is killed by one of the actual products of petroleum. Bitumen is the most savage form

of petroleum, being both the blackest and hardest, and here it figures the utterly destructive effects of the foreign-run oil industry on Iran and its population.

Safdari's representation of the violence exerted by the petroleum industry does not end here. In the second story, "Akusia," the title character is Alseno's friend, who also ends up being killed by foreigners in a brutal way. Akusia starts the story feeling hostile to the foreigners, who, according to him,

always wanted to get rid of us. When they just came to Iran, it was during the war. They said: "we are traders, and we mind our own business. We just sell our stuff. And if you want, we can make an agreement." When the oil was nationalized, the British left, and the American police took their place and they collected British guns. You know the story of the post-coup d'état. They have been bossing us around since then.²⁶²

This passage first of all makes readers aware that the foreigners are no longer the British, but the Americans, as the story takes place in the 1970s. Second, it shows that the wounds of the oil de-nationalization after the American-sponsored coup d'état are still raw.

In the story, four foreigners are accused of harassing a girl in the local community, echoing the gender violence thematized in "Siasanbu." Angered by this, the locals go after the foreigners and decapitate them, putting their heads on their chests. Akusia goes to work the next day and finds out about the killings. The police and the foreigners suspect Akusia of being involved. In the refinery, Jo, the foreign engineer, calls for Akusia and asks him some questions. The police arrest Akusia and keep him for seven days, before releasing him due to a lack of evidence that he killed the foreigners. After being released, he steals a box of milk for his child and is arrested again. This time, the police officer and Jo throw him in the back of a truck and drive to an area outside Abadan. Jo has brought a shovel and mattock in the back of his truck. They force Akusia to dig a hole. They put him in the hole and fill it up to his neck, leaving him to die of exposure and dehydration (Figure 3.3):

He is facing the city, with the yellow sun on his back which is playing with the blue of the sea. Akusia did not see them anymore. In front of his eyes is a wall of gunnysacks, cement bags, barbed wire, and lead-colored petroleum tanks. On the other side, with the noise of the gun shot, Khalumenu screams, and the bags of cement tiles fall on the backs of Seyed Ali and the other workers. It seemed that they all began to run with sacks on their back.²⁶³

²⁶² Safdari, 38.

²⁶³ Safdari, 38. Khalumenu and Seyed Ali are co-workers of Akusia at the refinery.

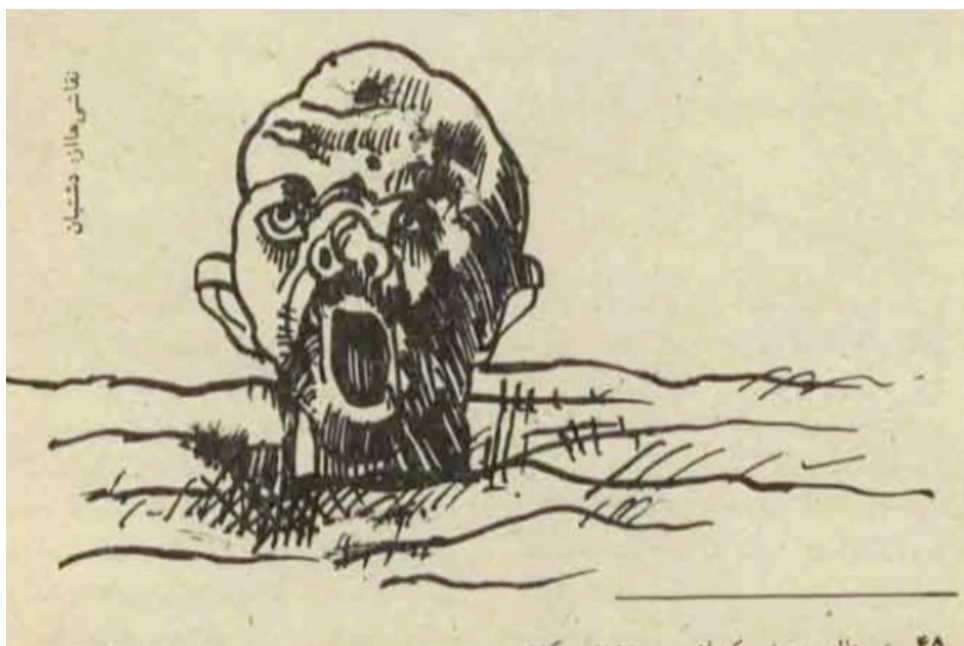


Figure 3.3: *Akusia buried in the sand*, in *Siasanbu and Other Stories*, p. 33²⁶⁴

It is not clear who fires the gun and at what or whom. The reader also does not know whether Akusia dies or is rescued by the workers who are running towards him.

Both of Safdari's stories feature graphic (near-)death scenes of locals at the hands of foreigners, and both death scenes unfold in the context of the oil industry: Alseno dies by having bitumen poured over him and Akusia is buried near an oil industry site outside the city featuring workers, equipment, and petroleum tanks. The story includes images of these (near-)deaths, to heighten their impact on the readers; they are the only works of Iranian petrofiction containing illustrations. Significantly, there are no illustrations of the four foreigners being decapitated; their deaths are considered deserved, so their suffering is not highlighted.

In the images of Alseno and Akusia, the tortured worker is screaming in pain and is unable to escape the situation. These screams can be interpreted as the screams of the Iranian nation in the face of what it is suffering at the hands of the strangers who have come to empty their lands of a valuable resource. Set before the Revolution, the story expresses a feeling of desperation and impotence that retroactively works to justify the Revolution and its violence. In Safdari's stories, the violent characteristics of petroleum are not primarily located in the dangerous working conditions or in the environmental damage caused by oil extraction and transport, but rather in the foreigners' direct (sexual) violence against the workers and their families. Whether or not such violence occurred in actuality in the Abadan of the 1970s or

²⁶⁴ It is written in the corner of the image that the painter's name is Dashtian, about whom I have not been able to find any information.

should be read more symbolically, the stories can be seen as expressing the virulent anti-western feelings that characterized post-Revolution Iran, both on the part of Islamist revolutionaries and left-wing activists like Safdari. The stories also thematize the vast power difference between the foreigners and locals of Abadan before the Revolution, which determined the cultural impact of oil, and oil's deathly potential as a material substance.

Conclusion

The petrofictions by Taqvahi, Mahmoud, and Safdari, set around the 1953 coup d'état and the 1979 Iranian Revolution, show the involvement of Iranian locals in the struggle for oil nationalization and the other ways they found to resist the negative effects of the oil industry on their lives. Even though the oil nationalization failed and the other attempts at resistance depicted in these petrofictions end in death or imprisonment, what these texts have in common is that they aim to make clear the reasons behind the local Iranians' struggle against the foreign-run oil industry for readers, especially those living outside the oil-generating provinces, who might not be familiar with the workings of this industry. All three writers discussed in this chapter show local workers and residents of oil company towns recognizing the (semi-)colonial characteristics of the petroleum industry and rising up against the presence of foreigners (whether British or American) on Iranian soil.

Naser Taqvayi focuses on the failed attempt of the workers to fight their exploitation by the oil industry, which is violently suppressed by the Iranian regime, portrayed as serving the foreign oil company instead of the Iranian people. His stories depict the workers' strong emotions towards the presence of foreigners in their city and towards the stark contrast between how these foreigners live and how the workers are made to live, as well as their failed attempt to rebel against this presence.

Ahmad Mahmoud also shows attempts at resistance by the locals as doomed to fail as long as the Iranian state continues to support the foreign-run oil industry, but he devotes more space to outlining the reasons for the tensions between the locals and the foreigners, and also pays attention to the contact zones where the two groups meet and there is the potential for them to relate to each other differently. He tells the story of the oil encounter in this period from the point of view of a teenager becoming a man, who at first is fascinated by the foreigners, but who gradually becomes aware of the way the oil company affects his life (through displacing him, through making his father's livelihood obsolete, and through saturating the city with the smells and sounds of the oil industry), and is politicized by oil

nationalization activists. Through the eyes of his maturing protagonist, Mahmoud makes his readers aware of the struggles of Iranian locals living under the colonial conditions imposed by the foreign-run petroleum company.

The two stories by Safdari, finally, are very much influenced by post-Revolution anti-Western sentiments. He offers the most severe and most graphic indictment of the petroleum encounter as a literally deadly one. The killing of the local worker by drenching him in bitumen provides a new perspective on petroleum that has no precedent in modern Iranian petroleum fiction. Making not just the shantytown where the workers live, but also the Abadan refinery itself a place of violence and death underlines Safdari's indictment of the foreigner-run oil industry. As in Taqvayi's and Mahmoud's stories, the local workers turn out not to be able to fight the excesses of the oil encounter in an effective way in this period when the oil industry was supported by the Iranian authorities. As I will explain in the following chapter, local Iranian people appear in front of the camera of filmmaker Ebrahim Golestan in a more realistic manner. In Golestan's films, there is no binary opposition of locals and foreigners, but they nonetheless underline the harshness of the industry and the forced, unplanned modernization process that accompanied it.