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Crude oil and its false promises of modernization

Petroleum encounters in modern Iranian fiction

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Chapter 5

Petro-Magic-Realism in Moniru Ravanipour's *The Drowned* (1989)

*When three tall, blond men with blue eyes emerged from the white boat, the children began to walk backward. It was unclear where in the world these aquatic men had come from. It was not certain that they were humans.*³⁴²

In the previous chapter, I wrote about the Golestan Film Workshop and the petroleum boom of the 1960s and 1970s, which helped Iran's New Wave Cinema flourish. I discussed how the cinema of Ebrahim Golestan represented the encounter between the oil industry and the local Iranians in the petroleum frontier lands, and how the GFW functioned as an inspiring gathering point for many writers and intellectuals who were disappointed after the 1953 coup d'état. In this chapter, another aspect of the petroleum boom will be explored by analyzing Moniru Ravanipour's 1989 novel *Ahl-e Ghargh (The Drowned)*, which focuses on the impact of uneven development and forced rapid industrialization in the south of Iran during the 1970s.

The novel is set in Jofreh, an isolated village in Bushehr Province in the south of Iran where, in the pre-petroleum era, people's lives are shaped by their natural surroundings. The incompatible wind coming off the sea is their enemy, and the drowned youth who are living beneath the sea are their angels. These drowned youth are kept beneath the water as the hostages of the wind and other supernatural creatures of the sea. The people of Jofreh hold special ceremonies for the drowned youth in order to try to keep them safe from the jinns of the sea.³⁴³ The villagers' main ambition is to find the biggest pearl in the world.

This romanticized picture of Jofreh presents the village as its own little world, separated from and in no need of pursuing contact with the world outside. At the beginning of the story, Bubuni, one of the women of Jofreh, is looking out of her window at the village road:

³⁴² Moniru Ravanipour, *The Drowned*, trans. M.R. Ghanoonparvar (Independently published, 2019), 124.

³⁴³ The spelling "djinn" is also used, but I follow the spelling chosen by Ghanoonparvar in his translation of the novel. Jinns are super-human creatures, and their existence in the Islamic world and North Africa goes back to the pre-Islamic era. They are mentioned in the Koran as super-humans composed of fire and flames. Although they mostly have an independent existence, sometimes they inhabit in the body of a human being. The person who lends them their body for possession is called *Jinn-zade* in Persian. For more about the jinn, see Alireza Doostdar, *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and Uncanny* (Princeton University Press, 2018).

The road was empty, empty and quiet. Bubuni turned, looked toward the sea, and froze. It was her, the mermaid! on the sea, tambourine in hand, she was jingling and jingling it and dancing, her long blue hair spilling across the gentle waves of the sea. Bubuni closed her eyes, said a prayer under her breath, and looked again. When she heard the jingling sound even louder than before, and as she saw the seagulls twist and arc in the sky over Jofreh, she knew she was not mistaken.³⁴⁴

What Bubuni sees is a blue mermaid. The narrator indicates that such a creature is not an abnormal manifestation for the villagers, who believe the sea to be filled with supernatural beings or jinns: “The sea [was] filled with inhabitants, blue denizens of the waters. They were dancing. Sea lanterns hung on the masts of ships that had dropped anchor in the cove.”³⁴⁵ The people of Jofreh seek to make a connection with the wind and with the jinns, in order to keep their fishermen from drowning. While the men go to the sea, the women organize ceremonies, funerals, and all kinds of musical and social gatherings to draw the attention of the jinns and put them in a good mood. To fool the evil winds, they hold a ceremony for the drowned youth living under the water, and put lanterns behind their doors to attract the wandering blue mermaids, who come to Jofreh during the night. When it is not the time of fishing, the men of the village gather in the house of Zayer Ahmad, the village head, or sit on the water cistern outside his house.

Everything in Jofreh changes when the villagers see a white boat. This boat signifies their first confrontation with the new world of petroleum. Everyone, including the children, gathers at Zayer Ahmad’s cistern to look at the boat and those disembarking from it, who do not appear human to the villagers and who are considered emissaries of Busalameh, the main jinn of the sea:

When three tall, blond men with blue eyes emerged from the white boat, the children began to walk backward. It was unclear where in the world these aquatic men had come from. It was not certain that they were humans. From the top of the water cistern, Zayer Ahmad could see everything. Was Busalameh toying with crowned? Had he given them the power to reach land to drown the village? Or were they perhaps the denizens of the sea coming to the village in human form?³⁴⁶

The tall, blond men give apples to the children. While the other men of the village are still confused, “Zayer Ahmad breathed a sigh of relief. Now he knew that the tall blond men were

³⁴⁴ Ravanipour, 15.

³⁴⁵ Ravanipour, 15.

³⁴⁶ Ravanipour, 124.

not of the drowned, and that they could not be denizens of the sea.”³⁴⁷ Nonetheless, Zayer Ahmad remains suspicious of the men, as does Mahjamal, his son-in-law. Sometime later, the tall, blond men bring a dead body and the people of Jofreh begin to mourn the dead man. Another time, they come with a doctor to examine the children’s eyes and cure people’s aches and pains. After that, they come with their oil-detecting equipment:

They came once again. There were six of them, with strange and outlandish equipment. Away from the village, they measured the land. They stuck some things into the ground, dug out the soil from the depth of the ground and sniffed and examined it. Each one of them was busy doing something. One was writing, another was bent over a map, a third one was measuring the ground, and three others were sinking a large metal pole into the ground so deeply that Zayer Ahmad, worried, rose to his knees and held the hand of one of them, so they wouldn’t torment the land anymore. He was afraid that the large metal pole would pierce the skull of the dead of the land.³⁴⁸

These actions make Zayer Ahmad and Mahjamal even more suspicious, but the other villagers are fascinated and gather around the strangers. Again, the strangers depart, leaving the villagers wondering about their intentions: “The men sat on top of the water cistern and thought about the tall blond men who had come from the sea, and who spoke in the strangest language in the world, kind men on whose faces a smile never disappeared...”³⁴⁹ When the men do not return, the people of Jofreh feel sad about having lost their connection with the people from the other world. However, eventually the strangers come back again.

There are signs that the men cannot be trusted. Kheyju, Zayer Ahmad’s daughter and Mahjamal’s wife, is pregnant and one night, the fetus speaks to the three of them, asking “Thieves?”³⁵⁰ It is clear that the fetus is referring to the tall, blond men, but the villagers do not take this warning serious. After a while, the fetus warns them again: “Don’t say I didn’t tell you.”³⁵¹ This warning comes when the tall, blond men come to set up their equipment to search for oil, but it, too, is ignored as the villagers remain in awe of the tall, blond men, whom they call “sons of the sun.”³⁵² The rest of the novel shows how the oil company and the Iranian state ruin Jofreh by turning it into a petroleum industry site. The villagers are displaced across the world and the blue waters of the sea become dirty and smelly. The novel ends with the failed rebellion of Mahjamal, who turns out to have a mermaid mother, against the state and the oil industry.

³⁴⁷ Ravanipour, 124.

³⁴⁸ Ravanipour, 135.

³⁴⁹ Ravanipour, 125.

³⁵⁰ Ravanipour, 132.

³⁵¹ Ravanipour, 132.

³⁵² Ravanipour, 136.

Ravanipour, who became active as a writer after the Iranian Revolution, is the first Iranian woman writer to represent the oil encounter. Born in 1954 in Jofreh, Ravanipour, in her teenage years, moved to Shiraz Province. Her family were anti-shah activists and played an important role during the Iranian Revolution, with some of her relatives arrested and executed during the Revolutionary uprising. In the 1980s, Ravanipour was arrested too. In interviews, she never mentions her political interests or the members of her family who were executed. She does talk about the time she spent in prison, during which she decided to become a writer: “I chose writing as my full-time profession in the prison.”³⁵³ Being a writer was a dream she continued to pursue after her release, but her ongoing struggles with state censorship caused her to leave Iran for the United States in 2006. There, she got a scholarship from Brown University and became an international writers’ project fellow. At present, Ravanipour lives in Texas and manages one of the biggest online story writing classes in the Persian language.³⁵⁴

The first version of *The Drowned* was published in 1989 in Iran and Ravanipour published a revised edition in 2012 in the United States. The second edition places more emphasis on the destructive encounter of the villagers with the oil industry. M.R. Ghanoonparver translated this version in 2019, introducing *The Drowned* to the English-speaking world. I devote a chapter to this novel because of the unique perspective it gives on the Iranian oil encounter. *The Drowned* is written from the point of view of villagers whose first contact with the outside world is via the petroleum encounter. In addition, the language and rhythm of the novel are very different from those used in the other narratives studied in this study, and so is the genre to which it belongs.

From Magic Realism to Petro-Magic-Realism

Ravanipour is among the Iranian modernists whose stories are considered to belong to the genre of magic realism, but she herself believes that what is called magic realism in the center has in fact been the reality of her peripheral hometown. She believes that reducing her work to this genre means ignoring the reality of life in her hometown, which considered what others would see as magic part of reality.

In her book *Magic(al) Realism*, Maggie Ann Bowers writes:

³⁵³ Moniro Ravanipour, “About Me,” accessed April 30, 2021, <https://www.moniravanipor.com/about>.

³⁵⁴ Ravanipour administers a Facebook page for those called *Kuli-ha* (Gypsies) and conducts online classes via Zoom and other accessible platforms.

The history of magic(al) realism, that is, of the related terms of magic realism, magical realism and marvelous realism, is a complicated story spanning eight decades with three principal turning points and many characters. The first period is set in Germany in the 1920s, the second period in Central America in the 1940s and the third period, beginning in 1955 in Latin America, continues internationally to this day.³⁵⁵

Magic(al) realism is, according to Bowers, rooted in European modernist paintings of the early twentieth century, when modernist painters were trying to “find a new way of expressing a deeper understanding of reality witnessed by the artist and writer through experimentation with painting and narrative techniques.”³⁵⁶ Franz Roh, the German historian and art critic, is known as the first person to write about magic realism in his 1925 book *Nach Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus: Probleme de Neuesten europaischen Malerei (After Expressionism: Magical Realism: Problems of the Newest European Painting)*, which tries to define modernity and its difference from expressionism. Bowers notes that, for Roh, the magic in realist painting was defined as follows: “the mystery of the concrete object needed to be caught through painting realistically: ‘the thing, the object, must be formed anew.’”³⁵⁷

According to Bowers, in Latin America Jorge Luis Borges is known as “the father of modern Latin American writing and a precursor to magic realism.”³⁵⁸ His collection of short stories *Historia universal de la infamia (A Universal History of Infamy)*, published in 1935, is known as the first example of Latin American magic realist writing.³⁵⁹ Bowers believes that Borges was influenced by European modernists and surrealists while he was living in Spain. She also believes that Borges had knowledge of Roh’s ideas and, on this basis, concludes that Latin American magic realism is rooted in European art and literature.

Soon, magic realism was adopted globally. According to Bowers, the combination of “magic” and “reality” in literary analysis came to refer to “any extraordinary occurrence and particularly to anything spiritual or uncountable by rational science.”³⁶⁰ she adds:

The variety of magical occurrences in magic(al) realist writing includes ghosts, disappearances, miracles, extraordinary talents and strange atmospheres but does not include the magic as it is found in a magic show. Conjuring “magic” is brought about by tricks that give the illusion that something extraordinary has happened, whereas in magic(al) realism it is assumed that something extraordinary *really* has happened.³⁶¹

³⁵⁵ Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism* (Routledge, 2004), 7.

³⁵⁶ Bowers, 7.

³⁵⁷ Bowers, 10.

³⁵⁸ Bowers, 15.

³⁵⁹ Bowers, 17.

³⁶⁰ Bowers, 19.

³⁶¹ Bowers, 19.

As Christopher Warnes puts it in his book *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel*, “what these otherwise different texts all have in common is that each treats the supernatural as if it were perfectly acceptable and understandable aspect of everyday life.”³⁶² He adds:

A basic definition of magical realism, then, sees it as a mode of narration that naturalizes or normalizes the supernatural; that is to say, a mode in which real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of equivalence. On the level of the text neither has a greater claim to truth or referentiality.³⁶³

This definition, in Warnes’s view, makes the genre particularly suitable for authors from the Global South to express and share their stories. Indeed, magic realism has been predominantly associated with the work of non-western authors like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende, and Ben Okri.

Warnes’s definition is also applicable to certain movements in Iranian literature. In the 1960s and 1970s magic realism first became prominent through Persian translations of Latin American magic realist texts like *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) by Marquez and *Labyrinths* (1962) by Borges. In addition, the provincial folklores of Iran have always represented magic and reality as interwoven. Thus, provincial writing in Iran is less likely to be mimicking the Latin American magic realist tradition than to be building, independently, on the literary traditions of Azerbaijan and the south and north of Iran, which all deal with local beliefs and traditions that incorporate magical elements. Such elements are present, for example, in Gholam Hossein Saedi’s *Mourners of Bayal* (*Azadaran Bayal*, 1964), Samad Behrangi’s *Olduz and Crows* (*Oldoz va Kalagh-ha*, 1968), and Simin Daneshvar’s *Sutra* (*Sutra and Other Stories*, 1980). All of these works are rooted in folklore in which jinns, mermaids, and other supernatural beings are accepted as part of everyday reality.³⁶⁴

In *One Hundred Years of Iranian Story Writing*, Mir‘abedini mentions that writers such as Ravanipour reveal the subordination of the people of the south in the style of Marquez’s magic realism.³⁶⁵ Nasrin Rahimieh also discusses the magical aspects of *The Drowned* in “Magical Realism in Moniru Ravanipour’s *Ahle Gharq*.” She believes that these aspects are based on “presenting two contradictory levels of reality”: the natural and the supernatural.³⁶⁶ Rahimieh refers to Amaryll Beatrice Chanady’s *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved*

³⁶² C. Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence* (Springer, 2009), 3.

³⁶³ Warnes, 3.

³⁶⁴ Hasan Mir‘Abedini, *One Hundred Years of Iranian Storywriting*.

³⁶⁵ Mir‘abedini, 831.

³⁶⁶ Nasrin Rahimieh, “Magical Realism in Moniru Ravanipour’s *Ahl-e Gharq*,” *Iranian Studies* 23, no. 1–4 (January 1, 1990): 67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00210869008701749>.

Versus Unresolved Antinomy, in which Chanady defines magical realism as installing the contrast between fantastic and reality at the semiotic level:

[In a magical realist text, o]n the ontological level, there is a constant antinomy between the natural and the supernatural, but on the textual level this antinomy is resolved, even if a close stylistic analysis would immediately reveal the ambiguity present in any magico-realist narrative.³⁶⁷

Rahimieh uses this notion in her analysis of *Drowned*, showing that for the people of Jofreh, the existence of the sea sprites in the village was not un-natural. The notion of “contradictory levels of reality”³⁶⁸ is also used by Fatemeh Shams in her review of Ravanipour’s novel. Shams tries to reframe “the real” and the “imagined.” She agrees with Rahimieh’s reading of the novel as magical realism, but believes that limiting the novel’s interpretation to magical realism will reduce it as an original piece of literature. It also, in her view, ignores the fact that what is designated as “magic” is actually part of “real” life in Jofreh. In support of this argument, Shams quotes Ravanipour:

[Magic Realism] was our real life. It was no different than our everyday life [in Jofreh]. I remember that one day there was an eclipse. We were not aware of its scientific reason of course. So, we went on the shore and started to pound on our copper dishes and started to dance and sing. We brought happiness to [our lives] by performing rituals... I did not borrow these unknown and unexplainable events from anywhere else.³⁶⁹

Shams adds that “what critics misinterpreted as fantasy, Ravanipour knew was the reality of integrated myth in a liminal, pre-industrialized place where villagers still weave folklore and ritual into an apophenic web to make sense of their world.”³⁷⁰ In Ravanipour’s world, it is “modern life--not legends--that is ‘the source of inexplicable and supernatural phenomena.’”³⁷¹

As Ravanipour stresses in an interview:

I was born in the south of Iran where there exists a rich but very different culture from the rest of the country. In the South, the characters from mythology are part of our lives; we live with mermaids, and with Ahl-e Hava and Ahl-e Ghargh.³⁷²

³⁶⁷ Amaryll Beatrice Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy* (Garland, 1985), 42.

³⁶⁸ Chanady, 42.

³⁶⁹ Fatemeh Shams, “Review Essay: Under the Waves: The Many Lives of Moniru Ravanipour’s *The Drowned*,” *Iranian Studies* 54, no. 7–8 (March 30, 2021): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2021.1902216>.

³⁷⁰ Shams, 3.

³⁷¹ Shams, 3.

³⁷² “An Interview with Miranda Mellis,” Moniro Ravanipour, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://www.moniravanipor.com/articles/2016/9/14/lorem-ipsam-dolor-sit-amet-mxkdh-f4ncw-92yam-s26xc-gr9lr-rte2x-mfgsk-zwwe8>.

According to Ravinapour and Shams, then, the magical, supernatural, and other uncommon aspects of *The Drowned* are natural, normal, and common aspects of life for the people of south Iran.

What I want to propose in this chapter is that *The Drowned* should also be considered from the petroculture point of view and read as a petro-magic-realist text that identifies the appearance of oil- and the industry around it-as a violent eruption of strangeness in the lives of the locals. It is the arrival of oil that brings a magical dimension into their midst that, instead of being part of their reality, disrupts this reality and the magical elements that it incorporated. In what follows, I will first outline the characteristics of petro-magic-realism, and then show which of these characteristics appear in *The Drowned*. As I will explain, in this novel it is not the winds or jinns but the magical nature of the petroleum industry that radically disrupts the everyday reality of village life.

The association between petroleum and magic was first made by Fernando Coronil in his book *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity*, where he argues that petroleum had a magical influence on the destiny of Venezuela. Coronil's argument is about the relation between wealth coming from natural sources and the state. He borrows the word "magic" from Jose Ignacio Cabrujas, a Venezuelan playwright. Cabrujas was invited by the Presidential Commission for State Reform (COPRE) to express his views about the situation in Venezuela during the presidential election in 1984. In his talk, he paid specific attention to the problem of oil:

Where did we get our public institutions and our notion of "state" from? From a hat, from a routine trick of prestidigitation...With the development of the oil industry a cosmogony was created in Venezuela. The state acquired a providential hue. From a slow evolution, as slow as everything that is related to agriculture, the state underwent a "miraculous" and spectacular development. It would be suicidal for a presidential candidate in Venezuela not to promise us paradise because the state has nothing to do with reality. The state is a magnanimous sorcerer...Oil is fantastic and induces fantasies. The announcement that Venezuela was an oil country created the illusion of a miracle. It created, in practice, a culture of miracles.³⁷³

By way of Cabrujas, Coronil portrays the cultural and social transformation of Venezuela into a modern "petrostate" as an act of magic, "a myth-making machine"³⁷⁴ conjuring a vision of a new reality: "in the hands of politicians oil wealth created the illusion that modernity could be

³⁷³ Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela*, (University of Chicago Press, 1997), 1. The exact date of Cabrujas' talk is not identified by Coronil.

³⁷⁴ Coronil, 375.

brought to Venezuela as if pulled out of a hat.”³⁷⁵ The petrodollars were spent on construction plans to turn Venezuela into a first world country, but transformed it into one of the most indebted states in Latin America, showing the unpredictability of petroleum’s magical machinations. Coronil traces the evolution of the country from a wealthy OPEC petrostate during the 1970s to an indebted nation during 1980s.

The myth-making role of petroleum money is also evoked by Jennifer Wenzel in her article “Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited: Unimagining and Reimagining the Niger Delta,” in which she writes:

petro-magic-realism ... combines magical transmutations and fantastic landscapes with the monstrous-but-mundane violence of oil extraction, the state violence that supports it, and the environmental harm it causes. Petro-magic-realism is a fantastic literary mode that makes visible the all-too-real effects of petro-magic read here as a mode of violence that mystifies through the seductions of petro-promise. Petro-magic-realism, in other words, can reveal the secrets behind petro-magic tricks.³⁷⁶

Wenzel uses Ben Okri’s story “What the Tapster Saw” as an example of how petro-magic-realism makes visible the ruinous transformation of Nigeria by the promise of petroleum modernity. The story, in her reading, presents “a phantasmagoric glimpse into a degraded, privatized landscape ...”³⁷⁷ Okri’s story is about a palm-wine tapster whose livelihood is threatened by the arrival of the Delta oil company. The story highlights the environmental violence that occurs when the company flattens the land and cuts the trees to prepare it for oil extraction, leaving the farmers in absolute poverty.

According to Wenzel, what makes this story a work of petro-magic-realism is the way the magical elements that formed an integral part of the wine tapster’s reality highlight the magic (in the sense of mystification) and violence inherent to petromodernity, which is the real transformative and disruptive force:

Juxtapositions of bombs and bullets, coups and executions, with herbalists and witch-doctors, talking animals and masquerades, in this fictional narrative about the collision of palms and petroleum, yields a petro-magic-realism that situates the magical and violent aspects of petromodernity within an older fantastic tradition and extractive economy.³⁷⁸

Wenzel adds:

³⁷⁵ Coronil, 69.

³⁷⁶ Jennifer Wenzel, “Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited: Unimagining and Reimagining the Niger Delta,” in *Oil Culture* edited by Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 217.

³⁷⁷ Wenzel, 217.

³⁷⁸ Wenzel, 218.

One of my aims in conjoining political ecology's analysis of petro-magic with the literary mode of magical realism is to consider how reality and representation converge: I coined *petro-magic-realism* in order to show how writers like Okri ... imagine the pressures of a particular political ecology within a particular literary idiom. They draw attention to the devastating material effects and unimaginable disproportionalities of petro-magic, at the same time that they invoke literary precursors like Rushdie, Tutulola, and Fagunwa.³⁷⁹

Analyses of petroleum's political ecology – its combination of political, social, economic, and environmental effects – cannot, according to Wenzel, reveal the full devastation it wreaks on Nigerian culture; it is the literary idiom of magical realism – drawing on Nigerian folklore – that allows Okri to make visible what the petroleum industry conjures, its “sweet lies and bitter truth.”³⁸⁰ Here, the “sweet lies” point to how the petroleum industry's “illusions of sweet surplus can, for a time, mask the harm that petroleum extraction does to humans and nonhuman nature.”³⁸¹

Wenzel's argument about Nigeria connects to Iran by way of Kapuscinski's book *Shah of Shahs*, mentioned in the previous chapter, which is referenced as outlining the extraordinary characteristic of oil. In this book, Kapuscinsky describes the way the oil boom of the 1970s conjured a fairy tale of easy, unending wealth in Iran:

Oil creates the illusion of a completely changed life, life without work, life for free. Oil is a resource that anesthetizes thought, blurs vision, corrupts. People from poor countries go around thinking: God, if only we had oil! The concept of oil expresses perfectly the eternal human dream of wealth achieved through lucky accident, through a kiss of fortune and not by sweat, anguish, hard work. In this sense oil is a fairy tale and, like every fairy tale, a bit of a lie.³⁸²

So, the magic trick that Coronil and Wenzel are both talking about is one of blinding people to the costs of oil extraction with the supposed benefits oil will bring them. This is a magic trick conducted by the oil companies and the elites of the countries in which oil is found, in order to deceive the masses, who are, as much of the petrofiction I discuss in this study shows, the ones who will ultimately pay the price, with their sweat, their life, and their culture.

Cultural dislocation, environmental damage, and experiments conducted by oil companies are among the aspects of oil colonization that are highlighted by petro-magic-realism, but it also emphasizes the specific temporality of petromodernity. Sarah L. Lincoln, who also writes about Ben Okri's stories in “Petro-Magic Realism: Ben Okri's Inflationary

³⁷⁹ Wenzel, 219.

³⁸⁰ Wenzel, 214.

³⁸¹ Wenzel, 214.

³⁸² Kapuscinski, 35.

Modernism,” describes the petro-magic-realist situation as one in which old and new, modern and unmodern, are gathered in the same geography. She quotes Fredric Jameson’s chapter “On Magic Realism in Film,” which argues that magic realism is the registration of a historical overlap of capitalism and pre-capitalism:

the possibility of magic realism as a formal mode is constitutively dependent on a type of historical raw material in which disjunction is structurally present; or, to generalize the hypothesis more starkly, magic realism depends on a content which betrays the overlap or the coexistence of precapitalistic with nascent capitalist or technological features.³⁸³

This overlap, according to Jameson, cannot be described in a linear realistic form. While Lincoln is writing about the Nigerian petro-inflation situation, highlighting the immense chaos produced by the simultaneity of inflation and colonialism the petroleum industry imposed, such inflationary modernism also occurred in Iran. As in Iran, the national petroleum company in Nigeria was a consortium of Shell and British Petroleum (which started as an Anglo-Iranian company). Both countries, moreover, were members of OPEC and benefited from the steep rise in petroleum prices during the 1970s. The revenues this brought, according to Lincoln, created “a certain magical reality, as a social and physical landscape that was daily being transformed by the power of magical money.”³⁸⁴ For local populations in the rural areas where the oil was being extracted, however, the oil boom, in Nigeria and Iran alike, brought “nothing but misery and degradation.”³⁸⁵ This magical aspect of oil, which I also referred to in describing the petroleum boom in the previous chapter, is called the *resource-curse* by Michael J. Watts in his chapter “Sweet and Sour: The Curse of Oil in the Niger Delta.”³⁸⁶ The curse that comes with resources like oil is that they have the ability to destroy the “organic, natural course of development.”³⁸⁷ While Watts’s examples mostly trace the resource-curse of oil as it unfolded in the Niger Delta, his work enables me to read the magic of oil as a curse in *The Drowned*, to which I now turn.

³⁸³ Fredric Jameson, “On Magic Realism in Film,” *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (1986): 311.

³⁸⁴ Sarah L. Lincoln, 2012. “‘Petro-Magic Realism’: Ben Okri’s Inflationary Modernism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, edited by Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough (Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.

³⁸⁵ Lincoln, 14.

³⁸⁶ Michael Watts, “Sweet and Sour: The Curse of Oil in the Niger Delta,” in *The Energy Reader: Overdevelopment and the Delusion of Endless Growth*, edited by Tom Butler, Daniel Lerch, and George Wuerthner (Watershed Media, 2012), 247.

³⁸⁷ Watts, 254.

Petro-Magic-Realism in *The Drowned*

In *The Drowned*, the image of magical transformation that oil creates exemplifies the “false promise of oil”³⁸⁸ described by Kapuscinski. It is the coming together of two contradictory phenomena, the petroleum boom and the locals and their traditional lifestyle and beliefs, that turns petroleum money into magical money and Jofreh into an unfamiliar land for its inhabitants. For the people of Jofreh, the world of petroleum is magical. Not only does the white boat with its occupants appear to them as completely alien, but the tall-blond men also bring with them unknown, seemingly magical technologies like radio, which appears to the people of Jofreh as “the strangest box in the world.”³⁸⁹ The people of Jofreh have never seen a box from which words and music emerge before, and think that men and women must be hiding inside it. The radio also confronts them with the fact that the world is bigger than their village – when the foreigners turn it on, a voice announces: “The time is seven forty-five. This is London.”³⁹⁰ Confused, Zayer Gholam insists “this is Jofreh, Jofreh.”³⁹¹

At one point in the novel, while the women are mesmerized by the voices coming from the radio and the men have become drunk from the magic drink given to them by the tall, blond strangers, their children get lost on the seashore. This leads the villagers to believe that the box has been brought to mesmerize them and steal their children. The narrator describes how “the breath of male strangers wafted in the village. With their presence, everything was changing in the village of Jofreh. The women would return from the well silently, as though they had lost their voices and had forgotten their songs.”³⁹² Not only do the women lose their singing skills, but the fishermen lose their jobs and resort to smuggling people and goods to the southern shores of the Persian Gulf. Most notably, the supernatural beings that had inhabited everyday life in Jofreh – as part of its reality – gradually disappear: “the mermaids had vanished. Seagulls flew over the sky of Jofreh at higher elevation. The gunshots fired into the air had scared them away.”³⁹³

In this way, the novel makes clear how the arrival of the petroleum industry has fundamentally changed the locals’ way of life and imagination, destroying a magical dimension that had always been part of their reality and replacing it with the false magical promise of oil. In a similar vein, Lincoln writes how “the oil boom effected profound changes in the psychic

³⁸⁸ Wenzel, “Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited,” 451.

³⁸⁹ Ravanipour, *The Drowned*, 140.

³⁹⁰ Ravanipour, 140.

³⁹¹ Ravanipour, 140.

³⁹² Ravanipour, 224.

³⁹³ Ravanipour, 224.

and imaginative lives of Nigerians, who were thrust into the newly monetized economy and polity.”³⁹⁴ She adds that “new wealth brought about by the influx of ‘petrodollars’ stimulated a period of wild optimism, a speculative frenzy in which everything and anything seemed possible for the newly endowed nation-state.”³⁹⁵

The effects of the influx of petrodollars are poignantly illustrated in *The Drowned*. Petroleum is represented as making possible a life that was not imaginable before. The modernization program begins with the construction of a water cistern, which makes the villagers’ lives much easier. Children start going to school, where a teacher tells them about countries, cities, skyscrapers, universities, and literature. The children become able to imagine other places and new possibilities for their futures. However, the modernization program also entails the fencing of part of the village, the construction of houses for the foreigners, the building of roads, and the arrival of cars and motorbikes in Jofreh. At first, the petrodollars generate a feeling of social optimism, but it quickly becomes clear that the modernization program interferes with how the locals want to live.

Petroleum, which at the beginning of the novel seemed to promise comfort and happiness, gradually reveals its true face to the people of Jofreh and they begin to consider it as evil, as aligned with the sea jinn Busalameh. The nature of Iran’s petrostate is compared to the nature of Busalameh: “For the people of the village, the world had become complicated and incomprehensible, and in their vague imaginations, Busalameh had been replaced by Mayor Senobari and the government.”³⁹⁶ The petroleum, and by extension the petrostate, is altering the mood of the sea and the land, and is the reason for the gray sky. The people of Jofreh become convinced that “Busalameh of the land is no less than Busalameh of the sea”³⁹⁷ as they are negatively affected by the oil and its overwhelming smell. As M.R. Ghanoonparvar notes in his 1992 review of *The Drowned* in *Iranshenasi* magazine: “...dizziness brought the people to their knees, it was as though that mysterious heavy smell that had blanketed the village was merely intended to empty Jofreh.”³⁹⁸ The elders of the village die and others leave. Ghanoonparvar argues that “even when a police station, school and Asphalt road were made in Jofreh, the people of Jofreh, and among them Zayer Ahmad, the head of the village, lost their mythical believes. For them, the ‘your highness’ is the Busalameh or his earthly pair and the Mayor Senobari and his gendarmes are working for Busalameh and are trying to ruin

³⁹⁴ Lincoln, “Petro-Magic-Realism,” 3.

³⁹⁵ Lincoln, 3.

³⁹⁶ Ravanipour, *The Drowned*, 218.

³⁹⁷ Ravanipour, 218.

³⁹⁸ M.R. Ghanoonparvar, “Ahl-e Ghargh,” *Iranshenasi Magazine*, Year 4, no. 14 (Summer 1992): 406.

Jofreh.”³⁹⁹ The Shah is implicitly invoked as ultimately responsible for Jofreh’s demise on many occasions in *The Drowned*.

The oil drains Jofreh of the magic that inhabited its everyday reality. As a result of the erection of a drilling dome at the sea front, mermaids no longer come to the shore. The people of Jofreh became more ordinary, as does Jofreh itself: there is no more blue water, no more lovely waves, no more beautiful mermaids. Instead of teaming with life, the sea has turned into a realm of death and danger:

The condition of the sea was strange. Its gray muddy color, the small lazy waves that moved slowly and spread on the sand, the dead fish, large and small, that came from the sea, and the clusters of seaweed smeared with tar that had turned the color of the sand black all were indicative of the surrender of a sea the waves of which at one time had reached the stars.... The children no longer played on the shore. Occasionally, if a child was not cautious and felt like going to the sea, he would come back crying with his feet smeared with tar and cut by the shards of glass.⁴⁰⁰

In line with another feature of petro-magic-realism, oil in the novel acts as a substance which, as if through magic, transforms locals into political activists. When some of the men of Jofreh, with the help of some leftist activists from the city, resist the forced modernization programs, specifically the building of a police station in the village and the construction of the drilling dome at the sea front, they become targets of the central government and are labeled enemies of the state.⁴⁰¹ Mahjamal, the son of a mermaid and a man, is one of these men. To avoid capture, he finds a place in the mountains and takes refuge there. Towards the end of the novel, he is making the petroleum pipes explode because he believes that the central state and its oil-enabled modernization programs are the source of all his misfortunes. Having been taken away from the blue waters of the sea in which his mermaid mother lived, he feels he has no other choice than to rebel. When Mahjamal is found and shot by government officials as a rebel, he yells “There is no pearl!”⁴⁰² This statement encapsulates the false promises of petroleum, which can never be realized and will always come at great cost to the lives of the locals.

Mahjamal’s death and the demise of Jofreh suggest that resistance to the oil industry and the state that enables it is futile and that the magic associated with petroleum will inevitably be violent. *The Drowned* represents this violence through its dystopian depiction of the petroleum extraction site, which stands in stark contrast with the idealized pre-petroleum life

³⁹⁹ Ghanoonparvar, 403.

⁴⁰⁰ Ravanipour, *The Drowned*, 345.

⁴⁰¹ The city is probably Bushehr, which is the closest city to Jofreh.

⁴⁰² Ravanipour, 322.

of the people in Jofreh. Ravanipour describes how, “every morning, the servants of the prefabricated houses passed the barbed wire fences with baskets full of empty bottles, and from the dam, dumped the empty whisky bottles over the dam into the sea,”⁴⁰³ how “the children no longer played on the shore,”⁴⁰⁴ and how “occasionally, if a child was not cautious and felt like going to the sea, he would come back crying with his feet smeared with tar and cut by the shards of glass.”⁴⁰⁵

Watts ascribes this contrast to the “shock of modernity” that follows the “petro-violence” of the oil encounter and describes how it manifests in geographies where indigenous populations struggle both against the oil company (Shell in Nigeria and ARCO in Ecuador) and the state.⁴⁰⁶ *The Drowned*’s portrayal of Jofreh’s demise emphasizes the cultural destruction this “shock of modernity” entails by configuring it as a process of radical disenchantment; it is not just an ordinary reality that is destroyed by the oil encounter, but a reality that was extraordinary – magical.

The Drowned is set in the 1960s and 1970s, which was the time of mass immigration of workers from all over Iran to oil extraction sites. In the novel, it is noted that “the workers, who had smelled the oil and had left their cities hoping to find work, without paying attention to the strange myths of the people, without fearing the mermaids and Busalameh, had built little shacks alongside the road near the village to entrust their bodies to the water of the sea.”⁴⁰⁷ While the workers are able to enjoy the sea, Zayer Ahmad observes how it has been spoiled by the oil industry: the “blue mermaids had apparently gone to the depth of the green waters because of the smell of tar and oil and the strange noise of commotion of the radios and cars.”⁴⁰⁸ In this way, the novel makes clear how Jofreh is a site of opportunity for the workers, but is gradually being lost to the locals, together with their traditions.

Watts locates the invisible character of oil not in the way it travels unperceived through pipelines but rather in “its power to tarnish and turn everything into shit.”⁴⁰⁹ Accordingly, Ravanipour’s novel traces how Jofreh is turned into a shithole by the petroleum industry and its unwelcome gift of modernity. During the petroleum boom era, the sea, the land, and the weather change for the worse and Busalameh, the frightening djinn of the sea, who used to

⁴⁰³ Ravanipour, 345.

⁴⁰⁴ Ravanipour, 346.

⁴⁰⁵ Ravanipour, 346.

⁴⁰⁶ Michael J. Watts, “Petro-Violence: Some Thoughts on Community, Extraction, and Political Ecology” (Workshop on Environment and Violence, University of California, Berkeley, 1998), 5, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7zh116zd>.

⁴⁰⁷ Ravanipour, *The Drowned*, 303.

⁴⁰⁸ Ravanipour, 304.

⁴⁰⁹ Watts, “Petro-Violence,” 11.

appear in the shape of a destructive wind, is replaced by the petroleum, which is darker and more frightening. By presenting petroleum as the ultimate evil djinn, *The Drowned* puts the destructive characteristics of petroleum in the terms of the Iranian cultural and local context, emphasizing how it takes over all aspects of people's everyday life, including their belief systems and imagination:

Zayer Ahmad's patients, who no longer talked about the mermaids, came to his practice as a matter of habit, and they spoke about blond women with blue eyes and about oil wells that had been found in the vicinity.⁴¹⁰

The blond women and the oil wells have replaced the mermaids and the wind. This has happened through the magic of petroleum, which has the ability to produce unimaginably fast changes at extraction sites. As the novel puts it, imagining oil as a monstrous force: "There was no good news. One village had been swallowed by oil. They had bought the people's houses for a pittance."⁴¹¹ The rapid changes make Zayer Ahmad, who had, in pre-oil times, wished for Jofreh to be connected to the rest of the world, feel regretful. While he and his family resist, others leave Jofreh and become displaced. There are also locals who welcome the changes. Some sell their houses to the company and some transform their businesses based on the new will of Jofreh by working as servants for the foreigners, running a supermarket, or smuggling goods to and from the southern shores of the Persian Gulf.

Soon, trucks and loaders enter the village in order to level the land. At this point, Zayer Ahmad is at a loss: "Was there a shortage of god's land to the extent that the government would have to turn the lands of Jofreh upside down for those who had come from the other side of the world to, as the deputy of Brigadier-General Senobari had said, modernize?"⁴¹² The narrator, who has so far emphasized Zayer's braveness in resisting modernization, here describes him as a "plundered" person who "could see the spark in the eyes of the village losing its brightness."⁴¹³ Zayer, whose house used to be the center of the community, spends his last days, before he dies from sorrow and old age, in loneliness. According to the narrator, he "would recall the days when the blond men in a boat that could go on land and sea came to the village, and he remembered the warning of his first grandchild, who had now grown up to be a tall, broad-shouldered teenager."⁴¹⁴

⁴¹⁰ Ravanipour, *The Drowned*, 295.

⁴¹¹ Ravanipour, 295.

⁴¹² Ravanipour, 336.

⁴¹³ Ravanipour, 338.

⁴¹⁴ Ravanipour, 338.

The deaths of Zayer and Mahjamal, the two heroes of the village, and the emigration of most of the other locals from Jofreh to the city, tell readers that resisting petro-violence and the shock of modernity it brings is nearly impossible and ultimately futile. What the novel pictures as happening in Jofreh is very similar to the violence wielded by petroleum companies such as Shell against the people of Ogoni in Nigeria, which Ken Saro-Wiwa designates as a “domestic colonialism” that is “cruel, unfeeling and monstrous.”⁴¹⁵ In *The Drowned*, this monstrosity is embodied by the figure of Busalameh.

At the end of the novel, two years after the death of Zayer Ahmad, the village has almost emptied. Of the old villagers, only Khatun is left, a village woman who fell in love with one of the strangers, standing bewildered at the seashore, noting its pervasion by oil, which has killed the life in and around the sea, as the people have turned to the hookah pipe for distraction from the polluted conditions in which they now live:

The condition of the sea was strange. Its gray muddy color, the small lazy waves that moved slowly and spread on the sand, the dead fish, large and small, that came from the sea, and the clusters of seaweed smeared with tar that had turned the color of the sand black all were indicative of the surrender of a sea the waves of which at one time had reached the stars. The sea moaned, as if an old rebel who placed his Brno rifle on the ground and was coming down the slope of the mountain slowly and sluggishly. A gray face was standing still on the sea. And it was unclear whether it was the smoke of the ever-bubbling hookahs of the people of the village or the smoke from the distant smokestacks that moaned day and night and brought sorrow to the people’s heart.⁴¹⁶

This description of the condition of the sea after the oil encounter is reminiscent of the picture of dead fish on the shores of the Persian Gulf with which I began the introduction of this study, and underlines, one last time, the destructive, disenchanting force of oil.

Conclusion

If magic realism appeared as the genre of the Global South, enabling writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Jorge Luis Borges to write stories that were about a situation that was not compatible with the realism of the northern part of the globe, then petro-magic-realism is a way for writers of non-western petrofiction to represent the way in which the treacherous magic of petroleum can turn worlds upside down in a glance. Through the lens of magic, this genre allows us to see clearly how post-petroleum time-space replaces pre-petroleum ways of life

⁴¹⁵ Ken Saro-Wiwa, *A Month and a Day: A Detention Diary* (Penguin, 1995), 73.

⁴¹⁶ Ravanipour, *The Drowned*, 345.

and landscapes, and how petroleum booms have nothing to offer local people but a deceptive promise of modernity.

The petrofictions discussed in previous chapters belonged to the genre of social realism or used allegorical language to represent the petroleum encounter. *The Drowned*, however, mobilizes petro-magic-realism to provide a new point of view on the oil encounter. Its narrative is focalized through the locals, most notably Zayer and Mahjamal, whose lives are radically changed by the oil industry even though they are not directly involved in it. They are not locals living in the suburbs of petroleum company towns, but locals whose pre-oil reality was situated completely outside modernity, urbanity, and globalization, and saturated with magical elements. Petro-magic-realism serves as the perfect genre to represent the disruptive encounter of two worlds of magic, one enchanted by mermaids and jinns, and one cursed by oil, with the first one eradicated by the second at a shocking speed. *The Drowned* is the only Iranian petrofiction to tell the story of what happened to the traditional geographies of the south when the oil industry arrived with its false promises of modernization.

In this chapter, I have shown how *The Drowned*, as an example of petro-magic-realism, represents the violent ways in which petroleum impacts local communities at extraction sites, with this violence obscured by its spectacular promise of effortless advancement and wealth. The novel forcefully illustrates how this kind of obfuscating magic associated with oil creates unbelievably real situations and has dramatic material consequences. In the end, it is not the first, pre-oil part of the novel, which features supernatural elements like mermaids and jinn, that is what makes this realist novel magical, as these elements are part of ordinary reality for the villagers. Instead, it is the second part of the novel, which highlights the phantasmagorical characteristics of petroleum and its violent effects, that introduces what can be seen as a form of black magic.

By portraying oil as black magic, as akin to but ultimately eviller than Busalameh, the beast of the sea and shores of Jofreh, *The Drowned* makes clear that the fast-paced alterations implemented by petroleum modernity do not just change the landscape and the way people live, but also their dreams and imaginations. Like Busalameh, oil comes from the deep, ruins the homes and lives of locals, and displaces the people; unlike Busalameh, it cannot be pacified with rituals or even defeated by violent resistance, as the death of Mahjamal shows. While this chapter dealt with a novel exploring the experiences of the local people, men and women, of one of the petroleum regions of Iran, the next chapter will deal with a petrofiction focusing on a woman's experience of the segregated and walled company districts in Abadan.