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Crude oil and its false promises of modernization

Petroleum encounters in modern Iranian fiction

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Chapter 6

An Abadan “Wife of Oil” in Zoya Pirzad’s *Things We Left Unsaid* (2001)

The television was showing a documentary about the Abadan oil refinery. Artoush was on the sofa, feet stretched out on the coffee table, reading the newspaper. I sat next to him and for a few minutes watched the pipes, the observation deck, and a section that had already been read and fell to the floor. I bent over, picked it up and asked, “You’re not watching? They’re showing your work.” “I get to see my work in person from dawn to dusk,” he muttered. I read the bold print of the headlines: Ambassador of the Soviet Union to Tour Abadan in Coming Days.⁴¹⁷

In the 2001 novel *Things We Left Unsaid* by Zoya Pirzad, which is set in Abadan in the 1960s, Clarice Ayvazian is a 38-year-old Armenian housewife who lives with her husband, Artoush, her 15-year-old son, and 11-year-old twin girls in the Bowardah District. Artoush is a successful engineer in the oil company, while Clarice is trying to find some time for herself between cleaning the house, making food, and taking care of her three children. She moved to Abadan from Tehran after she got married. A little later, her sister Alice and her mother moved to Abadan as well. Clarice and her family mostly interact with other members of the Armenian community of Abadan, and her children go to Adib, an Armenian school. A college graduate, before having kids Clarice had been translating poetry from Armenian into Farsi. Since her marriage, however, household work has kept her busy.

Her calm and eventless life alters upon the arrival of an Armenian family from India, the Simonians, in their neighborhood. The Simonian family is made up of a grandmother, Elmira, her 40-year-old son Emil, and her granddaughter Emily. Soon, the twins become close to Emily, and the families become friends. Emil is different from Artoush and for this reason attracts Clarice’s attention. He kisses Clarice’s hands when he greets her, listens to her, and comes to help her when she is gardening, while Artoush, when he is not busy with his work or political meetings, reads newspapers and listens to the news. Clarice has to wait for an opportunity to talk to her husband, who never pays attention to anything she does. Emil, on the other hand, comes into her kitchen and praises her food.

⁴¹⁷ Zoya Pirzad, *Things We Left Unsaid (Cheraq-ha Ra Man Khamush MikonM)*, trans. Franklin Dean Lewis, Reprint edition (Oneworld Publications, 2013), 13.

The attention Emil pays to her makes Clarice aware of her own sadness and unhappiness. The attempts by her sister and her friends to get closer to the Simonian family, especially Emil, further increase Clarice's attraction to him. Soon, however, she finds out that Emil only paid attention to her because he wants to get close to one of the girls in the community. This makes Clarice feel ashamed of herself and leads her to question her actions and thoughts even more than before. Meanwhile, she also finds out that Artoush is participating in secret political gatherings with his friends.

Clarice's family, their gatherings in her kitchen, their expectations, and their selfishness make her very tired and depressed. She feels that she is sacrificing a lot for her family and friends, and getting nothing in return. Artoush recommends that she gets involved with a female activism group in Abadan, of which his secretary is the head. In order to gain some distance from her mother and sister and friends, Clarice participates in one of the gatherings of this group at the Golestan Club. Later, she meets Artoush's secretary Mrs. Nurollahi in a coffee shop, where they discuss the aims of female activists in Abadan. This participation, though it is limited, makes Clarice feel more productive.

Meanwhile, the Simonian family has remained invisible for a couple of days. Clarice, who had intentionally limited her interactions with the family, does not want to give attention to their absence. One afternoon, as they return from a ceremony at the Golestan Club, they find out that the Simonians have moved out without saying goodbye. Everybody is in shock and the girl Emil had been pursuing returns home to Tehran with a broken heart. After this, Clarice spends more time alone, discovering the city, going to church, and becoming more distanced from the Armenian community. She also gets to know more about the closed oil company districts of Braim and Bowardah. At the end of the novel, her sister Alice marries Mr. Hans and moves with him to the Netherlands. Her mother moves in with Clarice and she continues her previous life, but this time with the help of her mother in the household.

Pirzad began writing two decades after the Iranian Revolution in an era that, as I explained in the first chapter, is well known for producing an impressive number of female writers. When it comes to the bestsellers of Iranian post-revolutionary fiction, female writers slowly came to eclipse male writers, in part because the Iranian Revolution resulted in the exile of many of the latter. Houra Yavari notes that "the second half of this period has witnessed a broad reception for works of fiction written primarily for entertainment purposes. These period

pieces are mostly written by women.”⁴¹⁸ She adds that these period pieces “are mostly stories involving happy endings to forbidden romances.”⁴¹⁹ In the less dismissive account presented by Kamran Talattof’s *The Politics of Writing in Iran*, women writers after the Revolution are said to “commonly manifest an awareness of women’s issues and gender relations.”⁴²⁰ According to Talattof, “this body of work contrasts sharply with the literary works produced by women in the decades preceding the Revolution.”⁴²¹ Following Talattof’s argument, I want to argue in this chapter that Pirzad’s novel deserves critical attention for delving into women’s struggles under a rigidly patriarchal system, of which the oil companies form an important part.

In addition, while the literary works discussed in the previous chapters were mostly about the native parts of the oil company towns and written from the locals’ point of view, Pirzad’s novel pays attention on the other part of the company town that was largely inaccessible to local people. *Things We Left Unsaid* (2001) provides insight into the lives of high-ranking, white-collar employees of the oil company in 1960s Abadan in the 1960s, who lived with their families in the company districts of Braim and Bowardah. It reflects on life inside the company districts and draws specific attention to the relationship between women and the oil industry. As such, Pirzad represents lives that do not become visible in most historical or political accounts of the oil industry: those of women and those of the Armenian community of Abadan.⁴²²

In the introduction of this study, I wrote about the gendered aspects of the petroleum industry and petroleum modernity, and explained how these aspects are further complicated when looking at a semi-colonized Middle Eastern country like Iran. I outlined how, in petroculture studies, the masculine characteristics of petroleum have been described, from a Western perspective, by scholars such as Sheena Wilson and Sharae Deckard, both of whom argue that while petroleum decreased the amount of housework incurred by women on a daily basis, it also maintained women’s status as inferior citizens by keeping them outside the social reproduction of labor.

In this chapter, I will argue that Clarice’s lifestyle in Abadan, as portrayed by Pirzad, reveals her as the Iranian version of a “wife of oil.” Deckard uses this phrase in her article

⁴¹⁸ Houra Yavari. “Fiction,ii(b)”, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol.IX. Fas.c, pp. 580-592; available online at iranicaonline.org (accessed February 2, 2021)

⁴¹⁹ Yavari, 580-592.

⁴²⁰ Talattof, *The Politics of Writing*, 139.

⁴²¹ Talattof, 139.

⁴²² ‘Abdollah Lahsa‘izadeh, *Jame‘eh Shenasi-Ye Abadan (The Sociology of Abadan)* (Kiyān Mehr, 2005), 467–69. Lahsa‘izadeh notes that Armenians emigrated to Abadan from the very first days of the establishment of the refinery. They were Armenians from Isfahan and Armenia. Unlike the Sikhs of Abadan, Armenians did not live in a specific district but they did regularly gather at the church or the Adab school.

“Gendering Petrofiction: Energy, Imperialism and Social Reproduction,” which discusses women’s work at oil extraction sites and describes the relationship between housewifization and fossil fuel energy. She borrows the term “wife of oil” from Nawal El Saadawi’s memoir *Walking Through Fire: The Later Years of Nawal El Saadawi in her Own Words* (2002), which talks about the time when Saadawi was writing her novel *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* (2001):

That month I was busy writing my novel *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*. Deep down inside me was the feeling that oil was the hidden factor behind all this. I gaze at the word “oil,” underline it and this gives me a feeling of relief as though I have taken the first step towards naming the unknown force operating without a name, as though I was revealing the relationship between oil and the death list, pulling out the thread that will unroll the skein.⁴²³

Deckard believes that Saadawi, in her novel about a housewife trapped in the household of His Majesty on one of the petroleum-producing islands off the southern shores of the Persian Gulf, “makes oil a primary subject”⁴²⁴ and that it acts as “an antagonist that structures the whole daily reality for the unnamed female protagonist,” who is thus turned into a “wife of oil.”⁴²⁵ Deckard uses the same term to describe the protagonist of Laura Restrepo’s *The Dark Bride* (1999), which is a historical novel looking back at Colombia in the early decades of the twentieth century when the US transnational Tropical Oil Company, known as Troco, was based there. *The Dark Bride* looks at a community of sex workers and their relations with the male oil workers. In both novels, Deckard argues that “oil is explicitly depicted as capital ‘that bulks out and inhabits’” the characters, shaping the psycho-social dynamics of their interaction.⁴²⁶ In addition, both novels are said to “share a central focus on the gendering of labor in relation to the intimate sphere of the domestic household.”⁴²⁷

Deckard’s analysis of the relation between oil extraction, women’s work in the home, and the social reproduction of labor is very relevant for understanding Clarice’s initial position and character development in *Things We Left Unsaid*. However, Pirzad’s narrative also engages with the specificities of the oil industry in Iran, which make Clarice a different kind of “wife of oil” than the characters in the novels discussed by Deckard. In what follows, I will first discuss the historical context in which the narrative of *Things We Left Unsaid* unfolds, namely the oil city of Abadan during the 1960s. After that, I will analyze the novel in terms of how it

⁴²³ Nawal El Saadawi, *Walking through Fire: The Later Years of Nawal El Saadawi* (Zed Books Ltd., 2013). Kindle.

⁴²⁴ Deckard, “Gendering Petrofiction,” 1.

⁴²⁵ Deckard, 1.

⁴²⁶ Deckard, 2.

⁴²⁷ Deckard, 3.

reflects on this historical context and how it positions, Clarice and the other women characters as “wives of oil.”

Abadan in the 1960s and 1970s

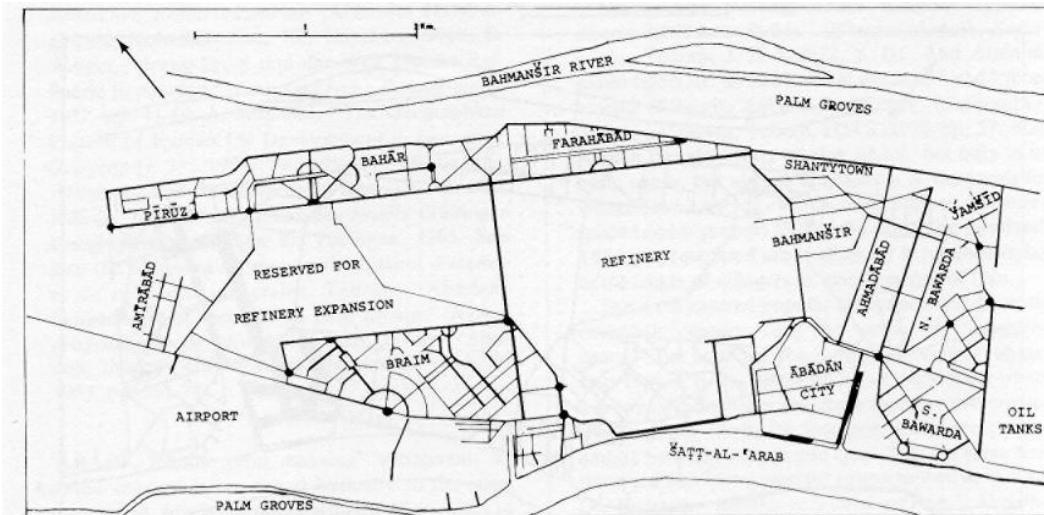


Figure 6.1: Map of Abadan in the 1960s. The map shows the refinery in the middle and the airport in the south-western corner. Braim is located north of the airport. The districts of Northern and Southern Bawarda are located to the east of the refinery. Source: abadantimes.com.

During the early decades of the 20th century, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company began to build a refinery near the shores of the Persian Gulf so as to be able to export the petroleum easily. The refinery was built on an island which was known as one of the major ports under the rule of the Ottoman Empire and then from the 17th century onwards was ruled by an Arab tribe called the Ka‘ b. As I explained in the first chapter, the island was ruled by Shaikh Khaz‘al until 1924 and rented by the British under a secret agreement from 1909 till 1924.

The Company districts were built gradually around the refinery and the city was divided in two. There was a “residential area” for the high-ranking employees of the company and a “native city” in which locals and low-ranking workers lived. The residential area consisted of Braim and northern and southern Bowardah, known as the “company districts.” Braim, which was for higher-ranking employees of the company and managers, was more isolated, situated between the river and the refinery. Looking at the map of Abadan in Figure 6.1, it is clear that the company districts were built on the southern and eastern sides of the refinery. On the northern side of the refinery was the native town, consisting of neighborhoods called Piruz,

Bahar, and Farahabad. Other districts for local Iranians, located between Bowardah and the refinery, appear on the map as Abadan city, Ahmadabad, and Bahmanshir.

As I wrote in Chapter 3, because of where the refinery was placed, commuting between the native town and the company districts was very difficult. Mark Crinson writes in his article “Abadan: Planning and Architecture under the Anglo Iranian Oil Company” that contact between the residential or bungalow area of Braim and the native town was limited and largely occurred through servants. He describes Braim as follows:

The “bungalow area”, also known as Braim, bordered the refinery to its south-west. By the early 1920s Braim had developed from a sprinkling of buildings to an extendable pattern of roads including specialist’s bachelor barracks (known as “Slidevalve” and “sunshine” and built in 1923) and large two-storeyed bungalows for the more senior officials nearer the river.⁴²⁸

According to Crinson, James Mollison Wilson, the architect who designed Abadan, who had previously worked for the British in Iraq and other parts of the Middle East, was responsible for the “formal segregation” of the city.⁴²⁹

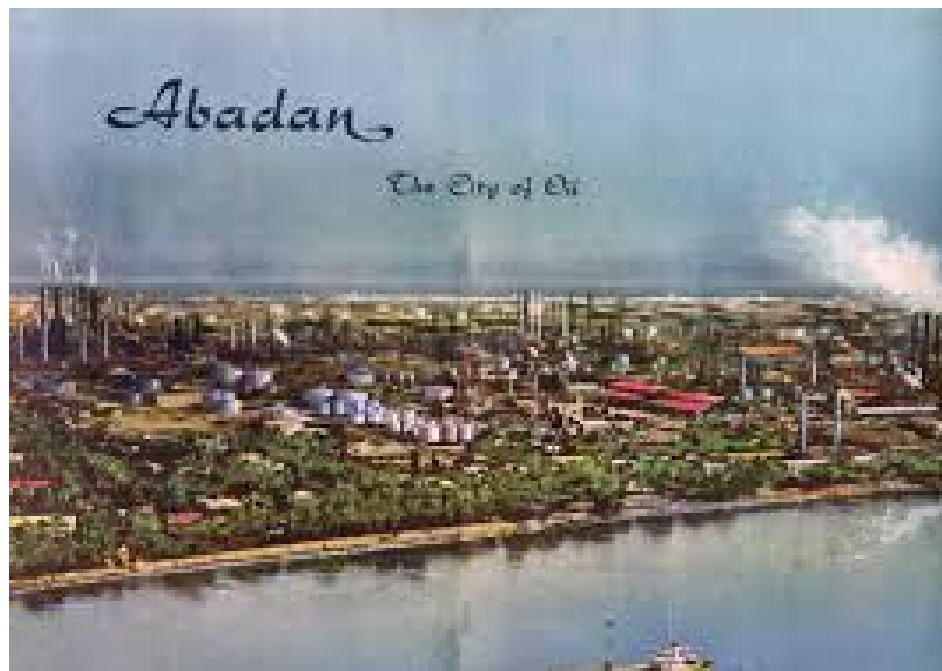


Figure 6.2: Postcard showing Abadan in the 1960s.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁸ Mark Crinson, “Abadan: Planning and Architecture under the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company,” *Planning Perspectives* 12, no. 3 (1997): 343, <https://doi.org/10.1080/026654397364681>.

⁴²⁹ Crinson, 347.

⁴³⁰ Image taken from Rasmus Christian Elling, “Abadan: Oil City Dreams and the Nostalgia for the Past Future in Iran,” *Ajam Online Journal*, n.d., <https://ajammc.com/2015/02/16/abadan-oil-city-dreams/>.

The picture in Figure 6.2 shows a postcard from the 1960s, produced by NIOC, advertising the glory of life in Abadan, which is presented as the “city of oil.” What we see is the river, with the bungalow area of Braim on the left, with clubs and gardens between the houses, and the oil refinery behind it. The houses in Bowardah and Braim are bungalows, known as “Dutch-style houses” and designed by Wilson.⁴³¹

Crinson writes that, when faced with growing nationalization sentiments in the Middle East after WWII, Abadan “proposed to meet this problem with a new residential area, to create Bowardah as a kind of manifesto of racial mixing, and experiment in non-segregation whose very design would afford that link or bridge over the present gulf between these two groups of individuals.”⁴³² The district of Bowardah, then, was planned to accommodate both locals and foreigners, unlike Braim, which was specifically designed for the foreign staff of the APOC. After oil nationalization in 1953 and the departure of the British from the city, the oil refinery was run by workers of the oil consortium, who were from different parts of the world. Progressively, the company town of Abadan was filled with Iranian engineers, who had graduated from international universities.⁴³³ The atmosphere of the city changed and although segregation persisted to some degree, it gradually became based more on the ranks of the workers than on their ethnicity or nationality. As a result, the population of Bowardah and Bowardah came to include many Iranian families.

During the oil consortium time, Abadan became the hometown of Persians, Arabs, Indians, and other Iranians, from different ethnic backgrounds and speaking different languages, in addition to Brits, Americans, and Dutchmen. This mixed population created the special Abadani dialect, which is different from that spoken in other cities in Iran. People in Abadan use Persian, English, Arabic, Indian, and Kurdish words in their daily language, with a touch of the local dialect. The most important reason for the development of this dialect, as Lahsa‘izade mentions, was the lack of Persian words for many devices and modern features of life. In fact, many English words remain present in daily Abadani dialogue, and English words also permeate the dialogue in Pirzad’s novel. Taking into consideration the fact that the British were in charge in both the oil refinery and its associated institutions, such as the hospital, it is only natural that the English language creeps into the speech of the characters of *Things We Left Unsaid*.

⁴³¹ Crinson, “Abadan,” 349.

⁴³² Crinson, 351.

⁴³³ Oil was nationalized in 1951 and “denationalized” by the 1953 coup d’ état. The term “denationalization” is used by Irvan Abrahamian for the post-coup d’ état situation. See Abrahamian, *The Coup*, 206.

The 1960s were the most glorious era of Abadan, when the company districts were flourishing because of the considerable oil revenues that poured into the city. From the late 1970s, however, life in Abadan was disrupted by the first sparks of revolution and war. The very first spark, as mentioned in Chapter 4, was the burning of the Rex Cinema in 1978, which killed 420 people. The subsequent Iranian Revolution (1979) and outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War (1980) forged a close connection between the cinematic and literary production of Abadan and the Khuzestan province as a whole, and produced the “sacred defense genre” (*Adabiat-e Defa'le Moghadas*). The name of this genre is derived from the fact that, during the Iran-Iraq War, Abadan, which had been called “the capital of the world” and the first modern city of the Middle East, became a center of defense.⁴³⁴ The city came under Iraqi bombardment in the very early days of the war, and the oil refinery was shut down from September 1980 until March 1989. The entire province of Khuzestan was a chaotic war zone for almost eight years, with Abadan reduced to a ghost town. Many of the locals fled to cities in the center of Iran, and many others took refuge in safer countries.

Post-war Abadan is searching for what Kaveh Ehsani and Rasmus Christian Elling call “utopia lost” narratives.⁴³⁵ In fact, there are Iranians and Abadanis in diaspora around the world who ignore the past of Abadan as a city full of inequalities and injustices, and instead try to produce a nationalist nostalgia about this city. Ehsani and Elling argue that this is a kind of nostalgia “of a younger generation longing for a mythologized pre-revolutionary past.”⁴³⁶ For this diaspora group, *Things We Left Unsaid* has been a powerful reminder of the lost past of the city. However, I believe that reducing the story to this does not give a full account of this novel. Focusing instead on the role of women protagonists in this novel, as I will do, not only highlights aspects of a lost utopia, but also makes readers familiar with the most invisible participants in the oil encounter in Iran: wives of oil.

⁴³⁴ *The Abadan Times*, “Nostalgia and the Oil City | Rasmus Christian Elling Explores Oil as the Stuff of Imagination in Abadan, South-Western Iran,” *The Abadan Times* (blog), April 17, 2018, <https://abadantimes.com/2018/04/17/nostalgia-and-the-oil-city-rasmus-christian-elling-explores-oil-as-the-stuff-of-imagination-in-abadan-south-western-iran/>.

⁴³⁵ Kaveh Ehsani and Christian Elling, “Abadan: The Rise & Demise of an Oil Metropolis,” *Middle East Report* 287 (Summer 2018): 32.

⁴³⁶ Ehsani and Elling, 32.

The “Wife of Oil” in Iranian History and in *Things We Left Unsaid*

Our knowledge of what women’s lives were like inside the white-collar districts of Braim and Bowardah is very limited. Although it is a work of literature, *Things We Left Unsaid* has been taken by scholars such as Rasmus Elling and Peyman Jafari as a source shedding light on real-life historical circumstances. In what follows, I will analyze this novel not as one that directly documents conditions for women in the bungalow areas of 1960s Abadan, but as providing, through its portrayal of Clarice, a critical feminist reflection on the situation “wives of oil” found themselves in.

In “Making the Invisible Visible: Women in the History of BP,” Valerie Johnson describes the position of women in the company towns run by BP, which at the time was known as the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. At the beginning of this article, she admits that “the oil industry has traditionally both a masculine and macho image and culture,” which is the reason that “women within this industry have been particularly vulnerable and invisible.”⁴³⁷ Johnson’s historical overview describes how Company employees initially needed to obtain permission from the APOC to get married and were often told that they should not even “consider the question of marriage.”⁴³⁸ Johnson adds that this situation could not last, as “the need for women in Persia quickly became acute.”⁴³⁹ Wives transformed from being seen as unnecessary and distracting to being considered highly desirable:

Their importance proved in their absence, women soon began to form a significant presence in the oil fields area and in Abadan. As well as providing a sexual outlet, wives had what could be termed a “symbolic” role, a sort of “angel of the house”, or a necessary good. Wives were widely viewed as bringing civility and gentility to male company.⁴⁴⁰

The wives brought to Abadan from the countries where the oil workers originated were under tight control of APOC and their husbands. According to Johnson, the housewives of Abadan “had no status of her own. Like other expatriate wives (colonial, military and diplomatic) the status of the wife ascribed to her came from her husband.”⁴⁴¹ Johnson’s discussion is limited to the early years of the oil company and to the wives of foreign employees. But it pinpoints something about the “wives of oil” that persisted into later periods. Like the first oil wives that

⁴³⁷ Valerie Johnson, “Making the Invisible Visible: Women in the History of BP” (Symposium on Women, History and Business Environment at the Women’s Library, London Metropolitan University, 2004), 15.

⁴³⁸ Johnson, 15.

⁴³⁹ Johnson, 15.

⁴⁴⁰ Johnson, 19.

⁴⁴¹ Johnson, 17.

arrived in Abadan, the women living in the bungalow areas of Braim and Bowardah in the 1960s were mostly housewives, and their lifestyles were considered part of the modernization program implemented by the Pahlavis.

The role of oil wives during the consortium and NIOC (National Iranian Oil company) period has been largely unacknowledged. In her PhD dissertation “A Social History of Labor in the Iranian Oil Industry, 1951-1971,” however, Maral Jefroudi does explore the role of women in the social reproduction of labor in Abadan during the time of *Things We Left Unsaid*. She notes that, while a few women were “engaged in lower strata staff positions working as stenographers, telephone operators, clerks, secretaries, and nurses,” most women in the company towns were housewives.⁴⁴² Because their work was not considered important, the archives do not mention these wives of oil very often, rendering them invisible in the history of the Iranian oil industry.

In his 2010 semi-memoir *Anglu va Banglu Dar Abadan Khaterat 70 Sale Pesarak-e Farmanbar (Anglos and Bungalows in Abadan: Memories of 70 years of Obedient Boy)*, Iraj Valizadeh on his part speaks about the housekeeping classes that the AIOC organized for Iranian women in Abadan. In addition, he recounts how, in 1945, the company organized classes at art institutions for the members of the white-collar employee clubs, which also organized competitions among the workers. Valizadeh specifically mentions a competition for “the cleanest house” in Abadan, at the opening of which the head of the AIOC’s real-estate office gave a speech, and includes photos of the winners.⁴⁴³ Among all the oil-company related associations in Abadan, however, there was only one specifically for women, which, according to Lahsai‘zade, “was establish[ed] to help them to rise and achieve their self-confidence.”⁴⁴⁴ This was a branch of the Women’s Organization, founded in the 1970s with the help of Farah Pahlavi. According to Lahsai‘zade, it had 150 members.

As I described in the introduction to this chapter, Deckard uses the term “wife of oil” to describe housewives living at petroleum extraction sites. Although Deckard does not note that what has been written about wives of oil is specifically about women living in oil extraction sites in the global south, the two novels she compares and analyzes are both set in this particular geography: the story of *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* takes place on an unnamed island on the southern shores of the Persian Gulf and that of *The Dark Bride* in a Colombian forest. A “wife

⁴⁴² Maral Jefroudi, “‘If I Deserve It, It Should Be Paid to Me’: A Social History of Labour in the Iranian Oil Industry 1951-1971.” PhD dissertation, Leiden University, 2017, 114.

⁴⁴³ Iraj Valizadeh, *Anglu va Banglu Dar Abadan (Anglos and Bungalows in Abadan)* (Simiahonar, 2010), 283.

⁴⁴⁴ ‘Abdollah Lahsa‘izadeh, *Jame‘eh Shenasi-Ye Abadan (The Sociology of Abadan)* (Kiyan Mehr, 2005), 383.

of oil” for Deckard is a housewife trapped by the walls of her home and doomed to repeat repetitive chores. She has few opportunities to participate in the social reproduction of labor in oil extraction sites, because she is financially and socially dependent on her husband and his labor for the oil company. The only role she fulfils is that of consumer. Deckard emphasizes that, while a wife of oil has available to her domestic staff and household appliances that decrease the amount of household work, the patriarchal organization of the oil extraction sites do not allow her to use her time and energy outside the walls of her household, except for shopping.

From Matthew Huber’s *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital*, Deckard takes the idea of “the good life,” which is grounded in the principle that the “mass consumption of oil only emerges out of a wider social context through which massive amounts of workers can actually afford single-family homes, automobiles, and the multitude of other petroleum-derived products that saturate everyday life.”⁴⁴⁵ Importantly, Deckard qualifies Huber’s work by explaining that oil has been more a helper of white western women than of women of color and those living in oil extraction sites outside the west. She insists that the good life delineated by Huber, which is “based on generalized mass consumption of oil products and desirable material goods in Fordist America, was only available to a certain kind of suburban, affluent, normative housewife, privileged to benefit from the astounding energy surplus of US oil.”⁴⁴⁶ Deckard then explains that the main characteristic of the wife of oil, as she appears in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, is in contrast with the image that Huber gives of “life in opposition to work.”⁴⁴⁷ The woman in the *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* “has nothing but work in the realm of the household.”⁴⁴⁸ Even though she is an educated woman, she finds herself an unwilling hostage in the household of the oil man and works in the house as if she is his personal servant.

As I noted earlier, the majority of women living in the oil company districts of Abadan were housewives and the freedom they had outside this role was extremely limited. In *Things We Left Unsaid*, Clarice is a mother of three, who, although she is able to enjoy the facilities provided to her by the oil company, is forced to confine herself to the repetitive tasks of cooking, cleaning, and washing, and to embodying the role of the good Armenian housewife and perfect Iranian mother-wife.

⁴⁴⁵ Matthew T. Huber, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 28.

⁴⁴⁶ Deckard, “Gendering Petrofiction,” 4.

⁴⁴⁷ Huber, *Lifeblood*, 85.

⁴⁴⁸ Deckard, “Gendering Petrofiction,” 4-5.

Pirzad's novel introduces a picture of life in Abadan as impossible without oil, not only because of the revenues it generated but also because of the foreign influences it brought. In fact, the novel has become famous for showing how different the lifestyle of Abadanies who were living in the company districts of Abadan were from that of other Iranians. This lifestyle was not only luxurious but also very westernized. Clarice goes to the *Milkbar* to drink café glace and discuss women's emancipation. When she is not in the mood to cook, the children have *fish and chips* at the *Annex*.⁴⁴⁹ Her husband has an old Chevrolet and refuses to get rid of it for a better car. At school, the children practice the play *Cinderella and Prince Charming*, going to the cinema is part of their routine, and Clarice's 15-year-old son has a picture of Alain Delon hanging on his bedroom wall.

Clarice's position as the wife of a petroleum manager is to some extent comparable to that of middle-class housewives living in suburban areas in America in the same period. In her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan identified the problem faced by these suburban housewives as "the problem that has no name."⁴⁵⁰ She describes it as a problem that "lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States."⁴⁵¹ This sense of dissatisfaction, which Pirzad also describes Clarice as experiencing, is specified by Friedan as centering on "the silent question - 'Is this all?'"⁴⁵²

Friedan emphasizes that American housewives struggled with this question in isolation, "each one thinking she was alone."⁴⁵³ This is also how Clarice feels. Most of the novel's scenes take place in her house, especially in her kitchen. Almost all the characters in the novel praise her for being a good mother and a good cook. Her house is always spotless, she always prepares an evening meal for her children, her dishes are always clean, and she washes the bedsheets, clothes, and curtains according to a fixed rotation. She is always the one to turn off the lights after everyone goes to sleep and, just like her own mother, she believes that in Abadan it is not enough to dust the house ten times a day.⁴⁵⁴ Because she lives in a company district, Clarice has a gardener provided by the oil company. In addition, an Armenian woman comes to help her clean the house once a week and an Arab woman called Youma is always waiting for her

⁴⁴⁹ The Annex was a restaurant which served western dishes.

⁴⁵⁰ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, Reprint edition (Dell Publishing Co., 1974), 11.

⁴⁵¹ Friedan, 11.

⁴⁵² Friedan, 11.

⁴⁵³ Friedan, 28.

⁴⁵⁴ The literal translation of the Persian title of Pirzad's novel is *I Will Turn Off the Lights*.

call. Instead of enlisting Youma or taking her children to the restaurants, fast food places, and clubs where they love to eat, however, Clarice feels obliged to take care of the household herself, also because there is nothing else for her to do in Abadan.

Trapped within the walls of her home, Clarice is a “wife of oil” in Deckard’s sense. She is constantly busy and works longer hours than the company’s remunerated employees. At one point in the novel, when she is helping the gardener Mr Monteza, in the yard, Clarice hears the sound of the Feydus:

I drew all the curtains. I should go pick up the broken flower box under the window ledge, I thought. But I did not. My favorite flowers were smashed, and it all seemed strangely unimportant. When the oil company siren signaled the end of the working day, I went into the bedroom. I thought of Mr. Morteza. Whenever the siren sounded, he would pronounce the word “feydus” like a sacred mantra, pack up his things and go home. It took a long time before I worked up the nerve to ask him what “feydus” meant. Mr. Morteza laughed. “It means ‘quitting siren.’”⁴⁵⁵

Clarice realizes that the gardener has the right to pack up and go home when the siren sounds, but that her work is never finished. The Feydus sounds for everyone except the housewives, who are the invisible, unwaged workers of the company town. For Clarice, there is no alternative to filling her days with housework, as she cannot imagine what would be waiting for her outside the walls of her lovely Bowardah home. Most parts of the city are not accessible for her, and the rest is comprised of houses and the refinery. As a woman who is from the company districts of the city, she cannot easily go to the native parts of the city. Even women from the native districts are more able to move around, as they work in the company districts as maids and helpers.

It is Clarice who connects her depression to the city, which is in large part still unfamiliar to her, thinking of of “the Arab Quarter of Ahmadabad, and of neighborhoods I’ve never been to and don’t even know the names of...”⁴⁵⁶ Clarice literally has no life outside of the house and feels that her work in the house is underappreciated; she complains on different occasions that her husband and her family do not recognize the amount of work that she puts in, although they praise her for being a good mother/wife. What makes Clarice’s situation different from that of the middle-class American women trapped in the daily routines of housewifization described by Friedan is that she is living in Iran’s most rigidly segregated oil city. Most reviews of Pirzad’s novel, which highlight the luxury amid which Clarice lives, miss

⁴⁵⁵ Pirzad, *Things We Left Unsaid*, 261.

⁴⁵⁶ Pirzad, 285.

the fact that the life of a woman inside the walls of a company district was not so different from that of a prisoner. A good example is the review of Claus V. Pedersen, who wrote that the lifestyle of people in the company districts of Abadan was luxurious in comparison to Denmark: “I grew up in middle class Denmark in the 1960s, and it was not until the late 1960s or even in the 1970s that many of the things we read about in *Cheragh-ha-ra man Khamush Mi-konam* came to Denmark.”⁴⁵⁷ These reviews miss the way the novel’s narrative focuses attention on the lack of freedom women like Clarice had in the oil city of Abadan.

An important factor in Clarice’s life as a wife of oil, which critics like Pedersen might read as inducing nostalgia for the “good oil times” of Abadan, is the company town’s encouragement of consumerism. This consumerism makes explicit the relationship between women and petroleum. According to Sheena Wilson’s article “Gendering Oil: Tracing Western Petrosexual Relations,” consumerism is what ties women to the oil industry.⁴⁵⁸ Wilson notes how western women are women modernized by petroleum, which put make-up on their faces, helped them in the household, and kept them from aging. Oil also helped women in raising children and was even instrumental in securing the right of women to choose the number of children they wanted to have. All these fundamental changes in the lives of women, from medical to social and political, could not have occurred without the consumer products petroleum made available.

As I said before, the “good life” Huber sees oil as providing was available only to a certain kind of woman, mostly located in countries with an energy surplus like the US. Although *Things We Left Unsaid* shows that this kind of “good life” was also lived in Iran, Pirzad’s novel refutes the idea that this was indeed a “good life” for Iranian women, or even for American women. The novel shows the shadow-side of this oil-enabled good life, which meant that women were like prisoners and did not have anything to occupy their time other than house- and care work.

Clarice’s relation with petroleum modernity, with her “little helper,” is the background for all the scenes in the novel. Petroleum is the fundamental shaper of her kitchen, where most of the story happens. Pirzad gives us the image of a lifestyle based on the availability of good food, good water, good housing, good cloth, and good leisure time, but which Clarice, like the

⁴⁵⁷ Claus V. Pedersen, “Abadan in Zoya Pirzad’s Novel *Cherāgh-Hā-Rā Man Khāmush Mikonam* | Claus V. Pedersen — ABADAN RETOLD,” *The Abadan Times* (blog), April 13, 2018, Accessed March 16, 2021, <https://abadantimes.com/2018/04/13/abadan-in-zoya-pirzads-novel-cheragh-ha-ra-man-khamush-mikonam-claus-v-pedersen-abadan-retold/>.

⁴⁵⁸ Sheena Wilson, “Gendering Oil: Tracing Western Petrosexual Relations,” in *Oil Culture*, edited by Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 244-267.

middle-class American women in Freidan's book, finds mindnumbing. In addition, her growing awareness of life on the other side of the fence makes her aware of how privileged her lifestyle and ability to consume and waste at will is.

In my reading of the novel, I will argue that Clarice's relation with oil and petroleum culture is complex and ambiguous, which makes it difficult to describe for scholars writing about the relationship between oil and western women, or oil and Iranian (Middle eastern/Muslim) women. As a non-western "wife of oil," Clarice is modernized by petroleum modernity, but trapped inside her neighborhood in the semi-colonized city of Abadan and unable to fully understand her position in Iranian society.

Having been socialized to consider the native parts of Abadan as out of bounds and dangerous, Clarice separates herself from the native town. This separation can be understood in terms of abjection. The concept of "abjection" is developed by Julia Kristeva in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). Kristeva insists that the abject is that which has to be "excluded" for the subject to emerge as an integrated, whole entity, an "I."⁴⁵⁹ Anything that permeates or threatens the borders of this I is experienced as abject and induces a sensation of "drowning towards the point where meaning collapses."⁴⁶⁰ Ernst van Alphen, in his essay "Skin, Body, Self: The Question of the Abject in the Work of Francis Bacon," asserts that, according to Kristeva, "the abject is what the subject-in-becoming must get rid of in order to become an I," and adds:

The abject is what the subject-in-becoming must get rid of in order to become an I. According to Kristeva the protection of the boundaries of the body is the main function of abjection. The anxieties triggered by the abject are first of all anxieties resulting from the end-products and by-products of the body, such as body fluids, blood, urine and fecal matter.⁴⁶¹

According to Van Alphen, abjection is a feeling toward something that has a very close connection with the self, but that the self should get rid of in order to become the self. The best example given by Kristeva is that of bodily extractions and the feelings of disgust the self experiences towards them. The abject, however, does not just manifest in the form of bodily extractions, but also in the form of cultural distinctions and phenomena.

⁴⁵⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Roudiez, Reprint edition (Columbia University Press, 1982), 126.

⁴⁶⁰ Kristeva, 126.

⁴⁶¹ Ernst J. van Alphen, "Skin, Body, Self: The Question of the Abject in the Work of Francis Bacon," in *Abject Visions: Powers of Horror in Art and Visual Culture*, edited by Rina Arya and Nicholas Chare (Manchester University Press, 2016), 120, <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/39618>.

To understand the feelings of Clarice towards the different parts of Abadan, the concept of abjection is useful. When Clarice comes back from doing the shopping, she walks through Bowardah and describes the district's orderliness from the perspective of a proud mother: "The identical houses on either side of the wide boulevard with their uniformly trimmed boxwood hedges looked like children just back from the barber, all lined up and waiting for the school headmaster to come to tell them, 'excellent! What clean and orderly children.'"⁴⁶² Significantly, this metaphor links maternal pride and the approval of the headmaster, an authority figure, to keeping the children clean and orderly, which implies an exclusion of dirt and disorder as abject.

Clarice fears the encroachment of the rest of the city on the company district of Bowardah; she fears that its borders may be porous so that the abject characteristics of the native town will invade her nice neighborhood. This fear disconcerts her and results in an obsession with keeping everything in her home in order, down to the smallest details. However, when she finds sugar, which attracts ants, under the kitchen cabinet, this makes her realize that her home is not perfect and that the dirty parts of the city are always on the verge of taking over. In line with Kristeva's theory of abjection, Clarice is both afraid of the disorganization the native parts of the city threaten to introduce into her home and life, and attracted by it. Oil, for her, is part of the uncleanness of the rest of the city; its smell bothers her, but she keeps returning to it, aware that her family is dependent on it for the "good life" they have gotten used to.

While her life seems easy and comfortable, Clarice is nevertheless unhappy and depressed. At some point, she begins to connect this unhappiness to the strictly divided city she is living in, which she did not choose and which never attracted her. She refers to two phenomena that do not abide by the boundaries of the segregated city: insects and the scent of gas both cannot be kept outside the gates of the company districts. Clarice hates the smell of the port, a central element of the city that cannot be fully excluded from her life. Whenever she ventures outside the neighborhood, this smell causes her to feel nauseous. This nausea indicates the overwhelming feeling of abjection Clarice has been socialized to experience towards the city outside the company towns, a feeling she also connects to her repulsion by Abadan's insects:

Ever since I was a little girl, insects were revolting to me, and still are. That, and all the smells that washed over me in Abadan, gave me a constant feeling of nausea: the smell of gas from

⁴⁶² Pirzad, *Things We Left Unsaid*, 251.

the refinery, the rancid smell from the drainage channel, the smell of fish and salted shrimp mixed with the Arab perfumes in the Kuwaiti Bazaar. It all combined to make me feel sick whenever I went shopping. Of course, along with all that, perhaps the main culprit was the heat and humidity. Why did I come to this city? Why didn't I stay in Tehran?⁴⁶³

As a housewife focused on paying attention to details, Clarice expresses her abject feelings by referring to the everyday aspects of her life. When she becomes angry because people have invited themselves into her house, she goes for walks in the streets of Bowardah and thinks about how much she hates the frogs and lizards of Abadan: "A hot gust blew over me and dropped what looked like a pea pod into my lap. For a second, thought, I mistook it for a worm or a locust, and instinctively flicked it to the ground, shivering with disgust."⁴⁶⁴ Clarice keeps returning to how much the insects and smells of Abadan, especially that of the refinery, perturb her, making clear that even when she is alone, the nature of the city and her position in it unsettle her.

Increasingly, Clarice feels that because of her confinement to the company districts, she has not fully experienced life in Abadan. Even though what lies beyond the company district walls frightens her, her frustration with her family and friends taking her for granted incites her to leave the company district. She goes to Abadan's Armenian church to find peace and to ask the Virgin Mary to calm her down. On her way back from the native town, she sees an alley with a blue door at the end of it:

Before reaching Cinema Taj, I turned my head to the right to look down a cul-de-sac, at the end of which was a big blue door, always closed, and always with a sentry standing guard. I had heard there was a compound like the Kuwaiti Bazaar behind this blue door, with coffee houses, stores vendors, and houses. The women who lived behind the blue door did not set foot outside their compound except maybe once a year. I had always wanted to see what was behind the blue door, but knew it was impossible.⁴⁶⁵

In the scholarship on the characteristics of Abadan, I have never encountered any mention of a door that connected the oil company districts to the native town, so this detail is likely fictional. Pirzad uses the imaginary door to emphasize the strict segregation of Abadan into the company districts and the native town. With regard to this segregation, Clarice notes: "I had been in Abadan for many years, but was always shocked by the contrast between the oil company's section of town and the rest of the city. It was like stepping from a waterless desert wasteland

⁴⁶³ Pirzad, 197.

⁴⁶⁴ Pirzad, 197.

⁴⁶⁵ Pirzad, 250.

into a lush garden.”⁴⁶⁶ The waterless desert wasteland is the native town, which has not benefited from the oil revenues, and the lush garden is the company district, where those profiting from the oil industry reside, living the “good life.”

Clarice has a point of view on Abadan which is very different from those who have written about this city as an oil city, such as historians, urban architects, and others. Clarice’s feelings towards the city, which result from her experiences as a “wife of oil,” are at the center of the novel. The way Clarice sees the city comes close to Kristeva’s description of the abject as something by which one is “sickened,” and which is therefore rejected. As Van Alphen describes abjection, it is a reaction of “loathing in order to restore the border separating self and other.”⁴⁶⁷ To keep the self (Clarice’s identity as a “wife of oil” and the identity of Abadan as a thriving city of oil) intact, everything that is other to it must be rejected. In Van Alphen’s words, “The other is ‘abjected’ from the self, because the abject is seen as not respecting borders, rules and positions of a society.”⁴⁶⁸ The insects and smells of Abadan so detested by Clarice exemplify this disrespecting abject force. The scents of Abadan and its insects do not respect the border between the company town and the native town. However, because for Clarice life in the company town is profoundly depressing, she feels the need to escape. This need prompts her to start exploring what lies beyond the walls of Bowardah, which turns out to not just be repulsive.

Clarice’s meaningless life becomes more miserable when she finds a love letter that her son Armen wrote to Emily. In the letter, he indicates that he was willing to elope with Emily: “I, too, seek to escape from my stupid sisters and my mother who only knows how to criticize and cook and plant flowers and *complane* [*sic*]...”⁴⁶⁹ Even though the letter is riddled with grammar and spelling mistakes, it simultaneously breaks Clarice’s heart and awakens her:

With the letter in my hand, I sat down on the bed and stared out the window at the jujube tree. And there I was, feeling ambushed, as though suddenly thrust in front of a mirror that reflected back an utterly unrecognizable image of myself. I folded the letter and put it back under the mattress, changed the sheets and pillowcase, straightened the bed, and left the room. I could barely read the clock through my tears.⁴⁷⁰

Armen’s words make Clarice realize that she has no real role in this male-dominated oil company town, and that even her son does not respect her, thinks her work in the home is

⁴⁶⁶ Pirzad, 251.

⁴⁶⁷ Van Alphen, “Skin, Body, Self,” 121.

⁴⁶⁸ Van Alphen, 121.

⁴⁶⁹ Pirzad, 212.

⁴⁷⁰ Pirzad, 212.

meaningless and unnecessary, and can see that she is miserable. He does not acknowledge the structural aspects of her position as a “wife of oil,” but attributes her complaining to her personality. Neither Clarice nor her son can see that she is oppressed as a woman by the patriarchal system of which the oil industry is a part. It is after reading the letter that Clarice goes to the native town to meet with Mrs. Nurollahi, Artush’s secretary and a member of the Women’s Rights Organization. The meeting, and all the incidents around it, wake Clarice up and make her realize that she could be more than a “wife of oil.”

The first time that Clarice participates in one of the meetings of the Women’s Rights Organization is accidental. Trying to escape from the members of a religious movement called “Mary’s Disciples,” Clarice joins a meeting about women’s rights instead. The focus in the meeting is on securing women’s suffrage. Clarice’s participation in the meeting makes her realize that she should become more involved with the majority of the Abadanis, and should not limit herself to the small, familiar Armenian community.

In the novel, connecting to a women’s organization is Clarice’s way out of despair and abjection. Significantly, the history of the women’s right struggle in Iran goes back further than the period in which the novel is set. In her chapter “The Women’s Organization of Iran: Evolutionary Politics and Revolutionary Change,” Mahnaz Afkhami argues that women’s organizations were established and grew in size and function during the period of rapid economic and social development of the 1960s and 1970s.⁴⁷¹ According to Afkhami, women’s participation in the constitutional revolution of 1905-1909 “is on record.”⁴⁷² The movement for women’s right grew as it was joined by educated women from various schools which were established gradually in big cities, such as Tehran, Tabriz, and Shiraz. In the 1950s, a growing group of educated women and also some of the women of the Pahlavi dynasty such as Ashraf Pahlavi fostered further growth of Iran’s women’s movement. In the 1960s, Mohammad Reza Shah’s modernization programs, which had become possible because of the vast petroleum revenues, fostered women’s emancipation:

By the 1960s women had become more organized and politically vocal, capable of lobbying the shah, the government, and the more moderate members of the clergy. A culture of development, which included the idea of women’s participation in social affairs, had taken stronger root, and the shah, a believer in modernization, had become more powerful politically.⁴⁷³

⁴⁷¹ Mahnaz Afkhami, “The Women’s Organization of Iran: Evolutionary Politics and Revolutionary Change,” in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*, edited by Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (University of Illinois Press, 2004), 110.

⁴⁷² Afkhami, 111.

⁴⁷³ Afkhami, 114.

The organization of which Mrs. Nurollahi is a member, and which she encourages Clarice to participate in, is called the Farah Charitable Society (*Jam 'iyyat-e Khayrihah-ye Farah*). It is a non-profitable organization presided over by Farah Pahlavi. When Clarice, upset after reading her son's letter, goes to see Mrs. Nurollahi, the latter explains the purpose of the organization to her:

Then she talked about their own society and its activities, about the efforts of women to win suffrage, about literacy classes, about how Iranian women were not yet aware of their rights. Now that she was speaking in a relaxed manner, not using those four-dollar words, I was inspired.⁴⁷⁴

Clarice, who has convinced herself that as long as her family is living in Abadan her situation will not change, finds inspiration and hope in Mrs. Nurollahi's words. After her appointment with Mrs. Nurrollahi and her walks through the native town of the city, Clarice begins to see some beauty in Abadan and to discern some possible ways to get out of the company town and her role as exclusively a housewife. She feels that she can finally take on a different role as a woman in Abadan, thanks to her involvement with the women's group. Escaping the bungalow area allows her to see the oil city for what it is: not a sterile space of wealth but a messy space of inequality.

At the end of the novel, Clarice has come to see herself as a capable person. After Alice's wedding, when Clarice is sitting on a swing, a characteristic attribute of Abadan's bungalow houses, Clarice looks at the butterflies in the garden. She thinks of the clothes and souvenirs that she wants to bring on the family's summer trip to Tehran, when a butterfly passes right in front of her face, "a white one, with brown polka dots. As I was remarking how pretty it was, I saw another, and then another. Seven or eight of them in all alighted on the red rose bush."⁴⁷⁵ Contrasting with the feared insects Clarice focused on before, the butterflies are a sign that she is finally able to see the beautiful aspects of her life, now that it is no longer confined to the company town and now that she can see herself as more than a "wife of oil." In addition to remarking on the pretty butterflies, Clarice, who was always complaining about the oily scents of Abadan, mentions that she feels a "gentle breeze" in the garden, which is unusual for Abadan and again indicates Clarice's changed feelings towards the city and her position in it.

⁴⁷⁴ Afkhami, 217.

⁴⁷⁵ Pirzad, *Things We Left Unsaid*, 334.

Conclusion

Things We Left Unsaid is successful in familiarizing the reader with the lifestyles of the wives of higher-ranked oil workers at the oil extraction sites of Abadan during the 1960s. My reading of the novel has focused on Clarice, as the only female protagonist in my corpus who is living inside the oil company districts and who gets to reveal her thoughts and experiences to the reader. The disjunction between the idea that she should be happy as a “wife of oil” whose work is becoming lighter and lighter because of the advances brought by petroleum, and her profound sense of boredom and dissatisfaction, is what the novel foregrounds in what I argue is a feminist critique.

By introducing the concept of the “wife of oil” to the analysis of Iranian petrofiction, I have sought to underline the gendered aspects of petroleum culture in Iran. Most of the other works analyzed in this study revolve around male protagonists. However, the ostensible “good life” of Clarice and the way that Zoya Pirzad unfolds her inner sense of dissatisfaction with this life facilitated by the oil industry, shows the reader that the masculine characteristics of petroleum culture are not limited to the world outside the gates of company districts. Pirzad’s novel makes clear that the oil industry marginalizes even those women that appear to benefit from it, subjecting them to the burdens of unpaid household labor, dependency, isolation, and depression. Overall, “wives of oil” like Clarice are sexually, socially, and politically marginalized in the social reproduction of labor at oil extraction sites.

Clarice is a “wife of oil” because she is not as fully modernized by petroleum modernity as women in the US or other first-world petroleum extraction sites: she does not drive, is not financially independent, has no washing machine, and uses the privileges her status affords her to please others rather than herself. Clarice’s fraught relationship with the segregated city of Abadan shows that the oil industry, although it modernized the city and the lives of some of its inhabitants, did not do much to emancipate women and change gender roles. In telling Clarice’s story, Pirzad’s novel underlines not only how, in Iran, petroleum modernity, which was rootless and ruthless, served to support patriarchy, but also points to the Iranian women’s movement as a counterforce. In the next chapter, I focus on representations of the failed experience of the oil encounter on the part of local tribespeople, who had even less power to assert themselves and change their circumstances than the “wives of oil” discussed in this chapter.