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Crude oil and its false promises of modernization

Petroleum encounters in modern Iranian fiction

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Conclusion



Figure 8.10: Windcatchers in the central Iranian city of Yazd. Photo from the personal collection of Mahsa Mojib.

Figure 8.1 shows windcatchers in the city of Yazd, located in the heart of Iran's central desert. Yazd is known for being one of the driest cities of Iran, with very low annual rainfall and high temperatures of well above 40 °C in the summer. The windcatchers belong to the pre-petroleum architectural era, in which fossil fuel energy was not as abundant as today. This tower guides the wind inside the basement of the building, under which there is a small pool of water. Flowing over the cool water, the air cools off and continues its way through shafts that end in the various spaces of the house and function as ventilators. The process is very similar to that of modern air conditioners running on electricity. The clean and beautiful blue sky in the image is a reminder of Iran's pre-petroleum era and stands in stark contrast to the image with which

this study started (Figure 0.1) showing the dead fish on the shores of the Persian Gulf, polluted by the extraction and consumption of fossil fuels.

Yazd's windcatchers remind us first and foremost of the days in which green energy was a reality – a time marked by a relative harmony between human civilization and the planet, made possible by sustainable energy sources. This image provides not only a reminder of a long-ago past, but also a vision of a possible post-petroleum future. Before delving into the role literature can play in imagining this different future, let me first return to the past as described in the previous seven chapters, marked by the ever-increasing presence of petroleum in Iranian fiction.

As mentioned before, this study has tried to show how modern Persian fiction critiques petroleum modernity by shedding light on the far-reaching effects of extracting oil from Iranian grounds and transporting it to the rest of the world. In these seven chapters, it has been argued that petroleum was at first considered magical and transformative, a valued treasure and healing honey, in the eyes of Iranian intellectuals and writers, but later came to be seen as something oppressive and even murderous. As I have shown in my chapters, modern Persian literature has represented the main turning points in the history of the oil industry in Iran, paying particular attention to foregrounding the perspectives of the ordinary Iranians working in or affected by this industry that are left out of official histories.

I have argued that the encounter of petroleum and modern Iranian fiction has been a two-way street. On the one hand, petroleum modernity had a very direct impact on the flourishing of modern Iranian literature. On the other hand, it is petroleum fiction which has represented, in different genres, the unseen and unheard aspects of the problem of petroleum in Iran. I have shown how Iran's petroleum fictions have been and continue to be committed to highlighting the exploitative conditions of the oil industry, fighting capitalism and (semi)colonialism, and effecting social and political transformation. The petrofictions I have analyzed describe the complex, almost mythical role oil plays in the life of modern Iranians, who are seen as waging a political and cultural struggle with a first-world cultural imperialism that was driven by the foreign oil companies but at times also embraced by Iranian rulers.

During the early decades of the establishment of the oil industry in Iran, the focus of petrofiction was on the foreign characteristics of the industry. Writers of these fictions, who were among the intellectuals in Iranian society, sought to enlighten the people about the oil industry's semi-colonial policies. They also expressed opposition against the 1933 oil agreement, which they considered unjust, and other actions by the Iranian state that favored the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC).

Later on, after the 1953 coup d'état and the failure of oil nationalization, Iranian petrofiction became more internalized, focused on tensions between local oil workers and the Iranian state. The stories written in this period – as well as the films made by the Golestan Film Workshop – were still committed to the idea of oil nationalization and portrayed the struggle of people and workers to achieve this dream. Petrofiction from this period told stories set in the oil company towns of Abadan, Ahwaz, and Masjed Soleyman that took readers inside the lives of the people living there, showing tensions normally invisible to outsiders. These stories represented the everyday life of the workers, the shantytowns they lived in, and their interactions with foreigners and agents of the Iranian state, including failed attempts at resistance inspired by people's dissatisfaction with the vast inequalities the industry produced.

Although the stories written during the 1960s and 1970s were among the most anti-foreign stories in modern Persian literature, they also revealed how the residents of Abadan and Ahwaz were gradually integrated into the modern world through having access to the most recent foreign literature and movies of the time. This access, in turn, sharpened their political identities, connecting them to uprisings around the world and providing inspiration for the 1979 Revolution.

Petrofiction became even more popular after the Revolution and the onset of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). The stories of this period are often nostalgic for a time and place destroyed by eight years of war. Writers wondered about the transformation of cities like Abadan, which seemed to have lost its status as a center of modernity. The transformation of Iran by petroleum and by war were considered both magical and unreal. Although the “magical” characteristics of petroleum are most tangibly addressed in the novel *The Drowned* by Moniru Ravanipour, the ungraspable violence of the petroleum transformation is portrayed in all the other post-1979 stories discussed in this study as well. The rapid pace of the transformation of land and people between the pre-oil and peak-oil times, and the imposition of a Western-model modern life on nomadic people by the oil industry, are portrayed in petrofiction of this period as having severe detrimental effects on the social, physical, and mental wellbeing of local Iranians, including those, like women and children, who did not themselves work in the industry.

By producing fiction about the petroleum encounter and the radical changes it wrought in the geography and communities of different parts of Iran, post-revolutionary Iranian petrofiction, written by people from remote villages, women, and Bakhtiyaris, broke what had been a long silence. It took a long time for the experience of the petroleum encounter of these writers and people like them to be voiced. One possible explanation for this, as I have argued

in Chapter 7, is that the petroleum encounter, for these groups, was so destructive and traumatic that they were unable to tell their stories during the time of the actual experience or soon after. Another explanation is that many of the writers who ended up telling these stories lacked access to Iran's literary circles for most of the 20th century.

Despite my attempts to include silenced voices, there are still some important gaps in modern Iranian literature's reflection on the oil encounter. Arab-Iranians remain the most underrepresented group, although they constituted the majority of the inhabitants of Abadan before the establishment of the oil company. Language has been a barrier to presenting stories about this group's experience of the oil encounter to Iranian audiences, and it would be good to have future studies investigate petrofictions about Iran written in Arabic.

Besides the continued underrepresentation of certain groups in Iranian petrofiction, the ongoing environmental crisis in Khuzestan province is another issue that should be mentioned in this Conclusion as worthy of more attention.⁵⁵¹ In fact, future Iranian petrofictions should encourage the country's transformation to a post-petroleum economy. One possible way forward is through paying attention to the drastic environmental impacts of petroleum and envisioning an Iran built with green energy sources, something many developed countries have been working toward for some time. According to Imre Szeman in *After Oil* (2016), the transition to green energy is not only "a reworking of our energy infrastructures, but a transformation of the petroculture itself."⁵⁵² Szeman wrote *After Oil* after the inaugural After Oil School (AOS), held in August 2015, which saw thirty-five artists and researchers gather in Edmonton, Canada to discuss key questions about the world after the petroleum era. The questions guiding this meeting are worth quoting in full:

1. Considering historical precedence, what cultural strategies are available to trigger and expedite a large-scale transition of energy regimes?
2. How does the problem of energy force us to rethink our traditional notions and categories of political agency?
3. How is the use of energy entwined with representations and narratives about modernity and the environment? Correspondingly, how do artistic productions reflect, critique, and inform our understanding and use of energy?
4. What range of scenarios is currently on the table for imagining our future with energy?⁵⁵³

⁵⁵¹ Dust storms, polluted drinking water, water shortages for agriculture and extreme weather are among the environmental issues this province is currently dealing with.

⁵⁵² Szeman and the Petrocultures Research Group, *After Oil*, 9.

⁵⁵³ Szeman and the Petrocultures Research Group, 10.

By trying to answer these questions, and particularly questions 3 and 4, Szeman indicates that the arts and humanities can help imagine the path to a world run on better forms of energy. He adds: “We will not make an adequate or democratic transition to a world after oil without first changing how we *think, imagine, see, and hear.*”⁵⁵⁴ By applying our senses and imagination in this process, Szeman argues, humanities scholars can help policy makers achieve an energy transition that moves outside the box of petroleum modernity:

What better set of disciplines than the humanities – art, history, philosophy, cultural studies, religious studies, and so on – to help us to grasp the history of our present and to imagine different possibilities for the future?⁵⁵⁵

I would like to use Szeman’s words as a guide for thinking about the possibilities of aiding the transition to a post-petroleum Iran by way of writing and reading literature. While it is important to consider Iran’s dependency on fossil fuel revenues and the chaos that might ensue if the country stops selling petroleum, literature can be of help in imagining what a peaceful post-petroleum era could look like.

First of all, writing about the dark aspects of petroleum modernity in Iran should not be limited to the southern school genre. Although the consequences of the oil encounter are more tangible in Iran’s southern provinces, Iranian petrofiction should also be about the effects of the oil encounter on other parts of the country. The fast-paced transformation of Tehran under the influence of petroleum modernity should, for example, also receive attention.⁵⁵⁶ Although Tehran-based literature is prevalent, the connection of this city to petroleum modernity remains largely unnoticed. Other cities and provinces of Iran also harbor their own untold stories about the oil encounter that could be explored in petrofiction.

Second, the next generation of Iran’s petrofiction should be committed to representing the negative consequences of Iran’s dependency on petroleum revenues.⁵⁵⁷ If early Iranian petrofiction criticized the country’s dependency on foreign companies, today it should focus on the financial characteristics of the global petro-industry and Iran’s position within it. Sooner or later, with the world’s biggest industries planning to go fossil fuel-free, demand for Iran’s petroleum will decrease considerably. Countries that have joined the Paris Climate Agreement

⁵⁵⁴ Szeman and the Petrocultures Research Group, 41, emphasis in text.

⁵⁵⁵ Szeman and the Petrocultures Research Group, 41.

⁵⁵⁶ See Azadeh Karimi, “Tehran Ranks Among World’s Most Polluted Cities,” *KAYHAN LIFE* (blog), December 18, 2019, <https://kayhanlife.com/news/kayhan/tehran-ranks-among-worlds-most-polluted-cities/>.

⁵⁵⁷ According to *The Global Economy*, the average value of Iran’s oil revenues in percentage of GDP between 1970-2018 was 21.29. https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Iran/oil_revenue/. This number dropped considerably after 2018 due to the sanctions.

have agreed to eliminate fossil fuel use by 2050. This means that the most influential industrial countries' need for fossil fuels will plummet and the price of Iran's oil will follow suit if Iran does not adopt a sustainable energy program in the next 30 years. This will mean rising unemployment, loss of government subsidies, loss of geopolitical influence, and many other consequences that could leave Iran in a worse condition than it is in right now.

Third, tomorrow's petroleum fiction should pay attention to what a post-petroleum Iran will look like. It is important to envision how the generation of green energy and the dream of a green Iran could be turned into a national project so that Iranian writers do not have to tell realist stories about civil wars, famine, drought, air pollution, and poverty. Fantasy and science fiction can be important genres for the next generation of energy fiction in Iran, as they are capable of imagining what is not yet present in a speculative mode.

Finally, Iran's struggle to switch to other sources of energy should be another subject for the next generation of Iranian petrofiction writers. Iran has sought nuclear energy for decades and the first nuclear reactor was launched in the 1950s.⁵⁵⁸ However, in the last few decades Iran has faced severe sanctions by Western countries, who claim that the Iranian government is trying to make nuclear bombs. While the government insists that its nuclear program is peaceful, its record of human rights violations against its citizens has made the members of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) careful about allowing Iran to develop nuclear energy. In 2015, under the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) agreement, Iran and the P5 group (China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK, and the US) agreed that Iran would provide necessary information for the IAEA; in return, sanctions against Iran imposed by the US and EU would be terminated. However, in 2018, during the Trump presidency, the US withdrew from the JCPOA and re-imposed sanctions against Iran. Even if Iran were trying to build nuclear weapons, this can be seen as a response to other countries in the region that have them, including Israel. A possible nuclear war between Iran and Israel has been the subject of many TV series propagating the viewpoints of these two states. But more cultural productions should look critically at what can be called the "nuclear encounter" in the Middle East and the price that the people of both countries are paying because of it.

While Iran has been pursuing nuclear energy for decades and has sacrificed a lot to achieve this goal, the country has been slow in adopting other forms of green energy compared to the other countries in the region. Saudi Arabia, for example, has been very active in

⁵⁵⁸ "Iran's Nuclear Program Timeline and History | NTI," accessed June 7, 2021, <https://www.nti.org/learn/countries/iran/nuclear/>.

establishing solar farms. David Hobbs has written in the World Economic Forum that Saudi Arabia has a clear mission to transform its economy to rely on low-carbon sources by 2030, in accordance with the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement.⁵⁵⁹ Turkey, meanwhile, is building both solar and wind power sources on a large scale. According to a report by SHURA (Energy Transition Center) published in 2018, wind and solar power were 20% of Turkey's energy portfolio in 2016.⁵⁶⁰ While Iran so far has little to offer in this regard, cultural productions such as literature and cinema can push a green agenda by bringing more attention to wind and solar power, and by looking back on the human and natural disasters produced by the energy history and architecture of Iran.

Given the opportunity for imagining a different world that fiction gives us, I would like to imagine a day when the petroleum refinery of Abadan is turned into a public garden or a park, and when Abadan's port starts exporting and importing non-petroleum products. I wish to see that day as much as I wish for the beautiful city of Amsterdam to never vanish under the waters of the sea due to global warming. I wish to see the blue sky of Yazd over the whole world. I wish for these things and I believe in the power of the literary imagination to make it possible.

⁵⁵⁹ David Hobbs, "How Saudi Arabia Can Become a Post-Oil Economy," *World Economic Forum*, accessed May 22, 2021, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/05/saudi-arabia-post-oil-economy-david-hobbs/>.

⁵⁶⁰ Deger Saygin and Philip Gordon, "Lessons from Global Experiences for Accelerating Energy Transition in Turkey through Solar and Wind Power," *SHURA*, 2018, accessed May 22, 2021, www.shura.org.tr.