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Petroleum encounters in modern Iranian fiction

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Publication date

2021

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

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

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Summary

Cride Oil and Its False Promises of Modernization: Petroleum Encounters in Modern Iranian Fiction

This study focuses on the representation of petroleum in modern Iranian literature written between the 1940s and 2010s. I analyze the imagery and symbolism of oil, as well as how the oil encounter's cultural, social, and political effects are represented in what has become known as the genre of "petrofiction." My focus is on how this literature engages the Iranian historical context in which, since the early 20th century, the production and consumption of oil has created a particular form of "oil modernity" marked by rapid social, political, cultural, and economic transformations.

Iranian art, cinema, and literature about petroleum reveals the transformational effect oil had on the country during the 20th century. Much like in the rest of the world, petroleum brought modernity to Iran, transforming it so dramatically that cultural representations could not avoid including it. Petroleum, whether as a substance, an industry, or a cultural phenomenon yielding particular imaginations of Iran and its place in the world, appeared in different shapes in modern Iranian art, literature, and cinema. Literature has been the most popular cultural form in Iran for more than a thousand years and started to engage with petroleum in the second half of the 20th century, most prominently after the coup d'état of 1953. It has reflected on the effects of the oil encounter in different forms and styles, from poems to fables, from realism to allegory, and from explicit social criticism to satire.

Studying literary representations of petroleum helps us to understand the impact of this substance on the formation and development of modern Iran and, more specifically, the role played in this by the formation of oil company towns in the south of the country. It also reveals the growing influence of other cultures on Iran in the wake of the birth of the oil industry, which led, for example, to a surge in translations of international literary works, specifically American and Russian ones, into Persian. By looking primarily at literature, but also at some other cultural productions reflecting on the oil encounter, the colonial characteristics of the oil company towns in Khuzestan province and the often-traumatic experiences of local communities in and around these towns, which do not receive a lot of attention in historical accounts, can be understood better. The same goes for the influence of petroleum on the living conditions of Iranians, particularly during the petroleum boom in the 1960s and 1970s, when

it had a direct impact on the (forced) modernization imposed on women, the establishment of schools and universities, and the construction of roads, railroads, and airports.

Despite its huge impact on society, both in terms of its production and its consumption, petroleum has received relatively little attention from a cultural perspective; it has been approached mainly as a chemical substance and a source of state revenue. This study uses cultural analysis to approach oil not as an economic asset, but as a commodity that embodies and creates cultural meanings. It aims to show how modern fiction in Iran was transformed through the nation's encounter with oil, and how this encounter was, in turn, given cultural meaning in modern Iranian fiction. In doing so, this research positions itself within the emerging field of the energy humanities and its subfield of petroculture, which has produced a considerable number of studies on cultural and artistic manifestations of oil in various contexts. By studying modern Iranian fiction, this research makes two important contributions. Firstly, it introduces a new perspective in the field of Iranian literary criticism by looking at modern Iranian literature from an energy humanities point of view. Secondly, it reveals the connections between energy humanities work concentrating on different regions of the world.

So far, the Iranian petroleum industry has primarily been studied from a historical point of view. Historians like Touraj Atabaki, Kaveh Ehsani, Peyman Jafari, and Maral Jefroudi have traced the history of the petroleum industry. In Iranian literary studies, there have also been some analyses of oil workers as characters. This study goes beyond this existing scholarship by presenting a cultural analysis of Iranian literary texts in which the oil encounter plays a central role, with a special focus on how, when, and by whom the history of this encounter has been told.

I refer to the fictions I analyze as belonging to the genre of "petrofiction," a term coined by Amitav Ghosh to designate fictional works that assign oil a vital role in shaping the social experiences, cultural identities, values, practices, political ideas, and actions of people living in oil-producing regions. While fictional, the genre of petrofiction is inspired by historical events, conditions, and places. In tracing people's everyday encounters with the oil industry and its wide-ranging effects, it forms a counternarrative to the dominant financial, technical, and institutional narratives about oil (corporations). Thus, petrofiction can be considered as a distinctive literary genre geared towards critical reflections on the human (and environmental) costs of the global oil industry.

In its analysis of my selected corpus of novels and short stories, this study focuses on how these texts envision the Iranian encounter with oil as involving questions of tradition and modernity, semi-coloniality and post-coloniality, center and periphery, gender and class relations, nostalgia, and trauma. Primarily, this study traces the footprints of petroleum in

modern Iranian literature, elucidating how it reflects upon oil as a substance, a source of revenue, and a cultural concept, and connecting these reflections to the historical contexts in which the selected works were produced.

As part of the historical context of Iranian petrofiction, this study draws particular attention to the characteristics of petroleum company towns. Most of the fictions I will discuss are set in the petroleum regions of Iran, located in the southwestern part of the country, particularly in the towns of Abadan, Ahwaz, and Masjed Soleyman. However, the setting of the novels and stories is not limited to these regions. Sadeq Hedayat's "The Case of the Anti-Christ's Donkey" (1944), Jalal Al-e Ahmad's *The Tale of the Beehives* (1954), and Ebrahim Golestan's *The Secret of the Treasure at Ghost Valley* (1974) are set in undefined locations and concerned with the impact of oil revenues on Iran in general.

While the main focus of this study is on modern Iranian prose fiction, several films written and directed by Ebrahim Golestan will also be analyzed, most notably *The Secret of the Treasure at Ghost Valley* from 1979. This film was made during the emergence of a new wave of cinema in Iran and focuses on the effects of imported modernization. In addition, some photographs of the early years of the oil encounter displayed in the BP Museum and the Petroleum Museum of Iran will be close-read in order to support the analysis of literary texts dealing with this period. The main prose fictions to be analyzed are, in chronological order: Sadeq Hedayat's "The Case of the Anti-Christ's Donkey" (1944); Jalal Al-e Ahmad's *The Tale of the Beehives* (1954); Ahmad Mahmoud's "The Little Native Boy" (1971), "Our Small Town" (1971), and *Neighbors* (1974); Naser Taqvayi's *The Summer of That Year* (1969); Mohammad Reza Safdari's "Siasanbu" and "Akusia" (1979); Ebrahim Golestan's *The Secret of the Treasure at Ghost Valley* (1974); Moniru Ravanipour's *The Drowned* (1989); Zoya Pirzad's *Things We Left Unsaid* (2001), and Farhad Keshvari's *Songs of the Dead* (2014).

In this study, I will focus not only on how the encounter with the petroleum industry is represented in the specific petrofictions I analyze, but also on how petroleum modernity aided the rise and flourishing of modern prose fiction in Iran. The research questions central to my analysis in the following chapters are:

- What are the main characteristics of Iranian petroleum fiction and its representation of the oil encounter in Iran?
- What kind of imageries, symbols, and narratives are used to represent the oil encounter in Iran, and how does Iranian petrofiction tell the history of the construction of new national, ethnic, gender, class, and political identities in the context of petro-modernity?

- Finally, how did petroleum modernity help modern Iranian writers, poets, translators, and filmmakers to emerge, and with what literary developments is Iranian petrofiction associated?

The first chapter of this study focuses on the connection between the growth of modern Iranian literature and petroleum modernity in Iran. It gives an historical overview of modern Persian literature from the early 20th century to the present. Historians of modern Iranian literature generally consider two historical events as marking the beginning of modern Iranian literature: the constitutional revolution of 1905-1911 and Reza Shah Pahlavi's coup d'état of 1921. Although the discovery of petroleum in the hillsides of northern Khuzestan in 1908 has never been mentioned in this context, I will take it as an alternative starting point, arguing that modern Iranian literature was influenced by petroleum modernity as much as by the revolution and coup.

The second chapter traces the early appearances of petroleum in modern Persian literature. Called "The Era of Petroleum Consciousness," this chapter demonstrates how Iranians, including writers, became cognizant of the importance of petroleum to local and international relations. It focuses on early literary representations of petroleum and how these representations reflected the reactions of notable intellectuals to the semi-colonial characteristics of the oil industry in Iran. The chapter focuses on two odes by Mohammed Taqi Bahar, *Masjed Soleyman* (1927) and *Curse to the British* (Post WWII), Sadeq Hedayat's story "The Case of the Anti-Christ's Donkey" (1944), and Jalal Al-e Ahmad's novella *The Tale of the Beehives* (1954).

The representation of nationalist and leftist activists in Iranian petrofiction is the main focus of the third chapter. I call the period from the 1950s to the 1970s "The Era of the Struggle for Oil Nationalization." This era saw a great expansion of committed literature reflecting on this struggle in the form of national allegory. The growth of anti-imperialist and anti-foreigner sentiments in oil regions and the locals' transformation into political activists are the main foci of the petrofiction of this period. The chapter focuses on "The Little Native Boy" (1971), "Our Small Town" (1971) and *Neighbors* (1974) by Ahmad Mahmoud; "Aushur in Autumn" and "The Summer of That Year" (1969) by Naser Taqvayi; and "Siasanbu" and "Akusi" (1979) by Mohammad Reza Safdari.

Petroleum modernity has also been very influential in modern Iranian cinema. This impact can be studied in different periods, of which the most important one is that of the petroleum boom of the 1970s, which led to significant financial and cultural growth in the country. Chapter 4 will discuss the Golestan Film Workshop and its influence on the emergence

of the southern school of Iranian literature. The chapter focuses on the critical observations of Ebrahim Golestan, a prominent writer and filmmaker, on the modernization efforts of the Pahlavi family, who are portrayed spending their extravagant petroleum earnings in two of his documentaries, *The Fire* and *The Wave, Coral, and Rock* (1958-1961), and in his last film, *The Secret of the Treasure at Ghost Valley* (1979).

Chapter 5 will discuss the influence of forced modernization and magical aspects of petroleum modernity by looking at Moniru Ravinapour's novel *Drowned* (1989), which tells the story of the transformation of the remote village of Jofreh by the arrival of the oil industry. Ravinapour's novel uses the genre of magical realism to tell this story, underscoring how this genre is used across less developed petrostates to emphasize the ungraspable, radically transformative force of the global oil industry and the false promises it conjures.

In Chapter 6, I will discuss the appearance of the archetype of the "wife of oil," introduced by Naval al-Saadawi, in Zoya Pirzad's 2001 novel *Things We Left Unsaid*, which acquaints us with the city of Abadan during its most prosperous years of petroleum boom in 1970s through the eyes of an unhappy housewife living in one of the company districts. My analysis of the novel will show how it pinpoints the perception of the oil industry and petroleum modernity as masculine as one of the reasons for women's subordination in petrostates. Pirzad's novel is one of the most-read Iranian novels of the last three decades and well known for inducing nostalgic feelings about the pre-Revolution era. My reading of it as a petrofiction shows that there is a critical aspect to the novel that counters this nostalgic surface.

Chapter 7, finally, traces the spectral presence of petroleum modernity in the city of Masjed Soleyman as it is portrayed in *Songs of the Dead* (2014), written by Farhad Keshvari, and in a number of photographs on display at the Petroleum Museum of Iran. I argue that Keshvari's novel portrays the first encounter between members of the Bakhtiyari tribe and the oil industry in the mountainous city of Masjed Soleyman as a traumatic or failed experience in Ernst van Alphen's sense. The main issue I deal with in this chapter is the delay in representing the early encounter of the locals with the oil industry, which made its appearance in Iranian petrofiction much later than the stories of the rise of petroleum cities such as Abadan and Ahwaz.

The conclusion to this study reviews the main findings of the chapters and answers the research questions. Building on Imre Szeman and the Petrocultures Research Group's *After Oil* (2016), it underlines the need for work in the energy humanities on Iran, past and present, and tries to imagine the possibility of a post-petroleum Iran.