

**Oil Armageddon: A Disquisition of Crude Reality through
Select Petrofiction**

Thesis submitted to Bharathiar University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the award of the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in English

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PSGR Krishnammal College for Women

College of Excellence – Awarded by UGC

(An Autonomous Institution – Affiliated to Bharathiar University)

(Re-accredited with ‘A⁺⁺’ Grade by NAAC – Ranked 6th by NIRF 2022)

(An ISO 9001:2015 Certified Institution)

Coimbatore – 641004

Tamil Nadu, India

January 2023

Chapter V

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Summation

An explicative inquiry into the petrofictions chosen for study has led to substantial findings that are obligatory in understanding the narratives of the contemporary times. The riveting changes that an oil narrative could bring into the literature does not only have the potential to define the future of critical studies and literature but also reclaim our past with a more devoted assignment of space and time to fossil fuel resources in everyday domestic, social and political life.

Oil inspired aesthetics in the literary imagination as represented in the petrofictions incorporated in this study is brilliantly structured using narrative styles by the authors that adds depth to the plot as well as exposes the myriad aspects in which fossil fuels accentuates the contemporary times since its discovery. In his summoning of the oil kindled reality in the *Cities of Salt* and *The Trench*, Munif employs the subversive intellectualism in satirising the reality. The narrative is episodic in nature with oil as the common thread that binds all the elements into one lengthy book. The episodic narratives provide a penetrating and inquisitive journey into all the aspects of the society and depends on actual history to provide authenticity for setting, plot and action. Thus, Munif through his masterful writing captures oil comprehensively like never before and sets the tone for his successors.

In *Oil on Water*, Habila opts for first person narrative and focuses on the geographical setting to picturises an oiled reality through the defiled environment in the Niger Delta and other social issues like migration, corruption and civil war. The narrative structure of the book bores resemblance to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* where the journey

down the Nile River is the significant part of the story. Similarly, in Habila's work, the journey down the Niger Delta for the characters becomes life changing as they decipher the truth about their landscape, nation and the environment.

In *Oil and Water*, the book follows a linear narrative style with an omnipotent narrator who provides an entire view of the oil massacre in Alaska after the spill. Evans uses figurative language to describe the ocean and the ecosystem of Alaska that is vandalised by crude oil that invokes images of darkness and an alarming tone of emergency. The book is very much shaped by the author's direct interaction to the oil spill emergency and this subjective point of view allows for more emotional exploration in the story. Thus, the book with its engaging and lucid narrative style does not limit itself to treating the oil spill as just an environmental emergency but also sees it as an event that can alter the social, cultural and psychological facet of the place and its people.

In *American War*, Akkad explores the dystopian setting that is an aftermath of the social and climate crisis in the present times. The futurism is exhibited through new inventions, collapsed economy, war and distorted environment. The flashback technique is used to recollect the events in this futuristic vision and pseudo-historical excerpts similar to the one's incorporated in narrative style of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaids Tale*, are included in-between the narration to provide background information, enhance the plot and works to convincingly validate the dystopian scenario as a factual representation of the future.

Crucial and authoritative presence of the oil resources in the petrofictions, *Cities of Salt*, *The Trench*, *Oil on Water*, *Oil and Water* and *American War*, is the total representative of the oil exploration scenario in many countries where the fossil fuels generate majority

of the revenues at the cost of indigenous and environmental exploitation. In the fossil fuel ridden contemporary social order where everyday life depends on energy resources, it is risible to declare a reality eluding it. The fuel resources had the power in it to transform the landscape, give rise to geopolitical territories, facilitate international trade and commerce, make automobiles essential, impact the indigenous way of life and alter the fate of many nations. With inference to the select petrofiction chosen for study, the dynamics of the oil centred societal apparatus epitomises the factuality that since its discovery, oil has been the coloniser and the civilization is colonised with its power controlling the economic, political, cultural, psychological and the environmental domains of the world.

The implication of the presence of oil resources in their territories is shaping the reality of many nations whose major revenue generating sector is the fossil fuels and their reverberations can also be seen through cultural annihilation, plight of the indigenous community and ecological catastrophe. Several issues in contemporary times throw light on the hard legal path the indigenous communities around the world opt for in fighting for the planet and people together. The Deepwater Horizon Spill by BP in the Gulf of Mexico in the year 2010 is one of the biggest oil catastrophes that had severe effects on the indigenous people and the ecosystem. The indigenous tribes of Amazon have major experience till date in protecting their culture and ecosystem against the consequences of oil exploitation.

The Houma tribe of Louisiana was originally the offspring of the Choctaw nation. Since the 19th century, Houma dialect pertaining to the Choctaw nations has not been actively spoken. Instead, English or Cajun French was the often opted language of communication, and only some elders spoke a Houma variant of Creole French. Before the oil spill, the

tribal group was engaged in reviving their original language, but the oil spill affected this cultural revival as it impacted the Houma way of life and destroyed many fishing villages. The Houma tribes had to migrate in order to protect themselves from the toxicity of the spill. The ability of the oil resources based catastrophe to terminate a cultural activity like language revival highlights the role it plays in cultural annihilation.

The town called Grand Bayou is home to the tribes called Atakapa- Ishak Indians, and their very survival was also threatened by the BP oil spill. Their fishing was interrupted because of the oil spill and for years this indigenous community has been victim of the oil and gas exploration which has claimed their forest, wetlands, fishing and shrimp baiting activities. The chemicals used to dissipate the oil spill on water have lasting effects on aquatic life for decades, thereby endangering their ecosystem, culture and livelihood.

The oil exploration activity in Ecuador has been the focus of the environmentalists and advocates of indigenous rights because of the heavy exploitation the tribes and their lands have experienced in the hands of oil companies like BP and Chevron. Chevron dumps millions of gallons of crude oil in the rainforest and has abandoned oil pits. The Native Indians claim that the crude oil contamination has led to illness, birth defects and cancer.

Oil development has also led to the extinction of culture. The Tetetes are the Ecuadorian tribes who lived near the town called Lago Agrio known for its oil activities. Petroleum extraction activities displaced a lot of these tribes and in the 1970s the missionaries were able to locate only two natives and currently Tetetes are announced as extinct. Similarly, many tribal factions like Secoya, Huaorani, Cofán and Siona were decimated because of exploitation by Chevron. Human rights advocates in Burma are convinced that

oil profiteering is an important reason behind ethnic cleansing based on the developmental activities surrounding the Shwe oil and gas pipelines. The pipeline would allow the oil from the Gulf and Africa to be pumped to China and transport gas from Aarkan in Burma to China.

The Aarkan State and the port of Sittwe are inhabited by the Rohingya refugees, who are ethnic Muslims. Port of Sittwe is the origin point of the pipelines in the Burmese coast. There are reports that Burmese military is involved in ethnic cleansing of these refugees in-order to clear them away from the Sittwe port for oil activities. Dubbed in international media and humanitarian conversations as the ‘world’s most forgotten or unwanted people’, Jamila Hanan, a UK based human rights campaigner and the founder of Save the Rohingya identifies that one of the principle factors for the expulsion of Rohingyas is the oil exploration plans. Thus oil activities and the economic interest of the politicians are the main reason for genocide and ethnic cleansing of the Rohingyas.

The Ecuador Amazonians of indigenous Waorani tribes enjoyed a historic legal win on April 26, 2019, when the court orders did not permit the state for oil exploration activity, thereby protecting half a million acres of their territory in the Amazon. This win is a ray of hope for indigenous communities around the world fighting for their land, rights and culture to avoid extinction. Currently, the Ecuador Amazon tribes have also won a petition started by nine girls against these oil companies. There are around 447 gas flares that have led to increase in cancer and other illness for the tribe as well as ruined their ecosystem. On January 26, 2021, the tribes won the bill against the oil company when the Sucumbíos Provincial Court ordered for these oil flares to be stopped because these indigenous people deserve a clean and healthy environment to live. These wins are very important

today as the voice of these indigenous groups are slowly being recognised and heard, and it would have a definitive impact on the policymaking, law enforcement and sustainable goals.

Conditions of the Navajo tribes of New Mexico are similar to the Ogoni people, as ninety-one percent of the public lands in the Greater Chaco region are leased for oil and gas exploration, and it has often been located in and around the tribal settlement. The members of the Navajo region are more exposed to the crude oil because they are twice as likely to be living near the oil and gas exploration site compared to the rest of New Mexico. The residents of San Juan are more exposed to the toxicity of oil and gas exploration and have high chances of developing diseases like cancer, cerebrovascular and respiratory problems.

The native communities belonging to the Peruvian Amazon region have won many notable lawsuits against the oil companies that have impeded the exploration process. The Ministry of Energy and Mines and Perupetro has planned to develop oil mines within Sierra del Divisor National Park, which is the home to indigenous communities living in isolation. The decision of the Peruvian judge to exclude this Amazonian indigenous settlement bordering Brazil in the oil exploration is a historic verdict because it was the first win for an indigenous community living in isolation against an oil company and also serves as a reservoir of hope for other ethnic groups engaged in serious legal battle against the oil corporate.

The indigenous communities of Peru and Andes have won many lawsuits against the oil company through the prior consultation law passed in 2011 which is inclusive in nature. The law grants the right to these indigenous communities to take decisions regarding

official matters by assessing the effect of it on their community life. This is an important step towards environmental justice and preservation of indigenous rights that sets an example towards a more inclusive and intersectional futures that can help preserve the planet.

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a 19.6-million-acre land that is home to wildlife like polar bears, caribou, snowy owl and various migratory birds. The land also holds sentimental and cultural value and is considered sacred by the Gwich'in also known as Kutchin who are Athabaskan speaking natives of Canada and Alaska. A recent significant decision in the oil and gas exploration in Alaska came after Joe Biden, President of the United States, on June 1, 2021, suspended the leases that were signed under Trump's presidency which gave permits for exploration activity in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The order also suggested that the environmental review must be carried out to analyse the possible legal limitations in the drilling leases. This was a commendable victory for the democrats, environmental organisations and the indigenous people who were fighting to stop the drilling activity in the refuge to protect and preserve their environment. Bernadette Demientieff, executive director of Gwich'in Nation Steering Committee spoke on behalf of all the tribal leaders and mentioned that they were heartened by the decision to suspend the lease on their sacred land and views this decision as an example of how government and law can work in harmony to protect the ecosystem and all the material and abstract values associated with it.

Important environmental justice movements in recent years include Black Lives Matter, Stop Asian Hate, Landback, Fridays for Future which is a youth strike for climate change, Louisiana Cancer Alley and many protests led by indigenous people for protecting their rights, livelihoods and inclusion in major decisions and policies regarding the

environment. The Dakota Access Pipeline protest that happened from 2016 to 2017 and Mauna Kea protest that happened in 2014 were led by indigenous community and garnered world attention as they raised the voice for indigenous justice, inclusivity and visibility.

The power vested by the oil resources to the financial monopolist has invaded all the dimensions of life and following the social, economic and psychological dominance, it has also taken control and affected the environment and indigenous life embedded on it with great rigour. While the environmental destruction is perceptible because of the stark changes, the predicament to the indigenous life and their ethnic knowledge is hidden in plain sight. The neocolonial hold that oil has over the civilisation can only be undone through unity, which includes the combined working of economic and political sectors under the best interest of the environment and culture associated with it to fight the coloniser. Thus, the presence or absence of oil resources determines the past, present and future. Recently, Marike Schiffer in her article, “A War Running on Fossil Fuels” published by Nature Human Behaviour on June 2, 2022, views the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine as a fossil fuel led devastation because of how firmly the Russian economy is supported by oil and natural gas trade. The profits were considerably used to strengthen the Russian military, and it further proves the indomitable role of oil in determining the casualties of war.

The current peak oil situation and the most pressing need for green energy has inspired the environmentalist, climate activist and other governing bodies to initiate the zero net carbon emission and sustainable goals. Removal of the fossil fuels from the equation results in the crumbling down of a power structure that is solely based on a carbon based apparatus. As the non-renewable nature of fossil fuels and the over-exploitation has led to the peak oil situation where the maximum limit of usage is reached and from

now on there is only a downfall in the curve of availability of the fuel resources. The petrofictions chosen for study demonstrate the authoritative presence of fossil fuels in the daily workings of the society, how the exploitative power structure ramifies the nature and culture integrated with it in a particular geopolitical domain and the impact of presence or absence of fossil fuels in the everyday routine of the society.

The success of fossil fuels lay in their accessibility and efficiency. The energy shift is a prudent process of transforming from the wider dependence on fossil fuels to other greener alternatives. The problem with the greener alternatives is their high cost of production and an efficiency that doesn't match the oil resources. Yet, these are the developmental obstacles that must be overcome in order to create an alternative that is viable and dependable as a replacement for fossil fuels and make the energy shift. Several pacts like Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015, The Paris Agreement of 2015 and recently the United Nations Climate Change Conference 2021 conducted in Glasgow also called as COP 26 have helped accelerate the energy shift. The major outcome of COP 26 was the unified response to hydrocarbon emission and the decision to make the transmission to cleaner alternatives and achieve cent percent zero carbon emission, especially by automobiles.

The oil resources propound a clear-cut distinction between the powerful and the oppressed, especially the marginalised communities and their cultural values. The environmental lens provides a cognisance of the indigenous way of life, the traditional life and the importance of preserving it in order to fully grasp the meaning of sustainability and practically implementing it in the present to avoid a societal collapse. The recent trends in ecocritical approaches like environmental justice and intersectionality has

allowed the environmental movement to be more inclusive and representative of the Global South and all the marginalised voices because the traditional knowledge and the rights of the indigenous community must be protected in order to create a sustainable future.

Literature in that way becomes the medium that carries the testimony of nature and culture and the preserver of the traditional knowledge. The presence of oil resources in the cultural realm is substantiated in many ways through their material and geological presence that has impacted history and progress. Currently, with the rising environmental awareness, peak oil and unethical extractions like fracking and ultra-deep drilling, the oil narratives have been subjected to cultural scrutiny by the critics in order to understand the severity of the crisis and the need for change. In that case, genres like petrofiction facilitate a more focused field that encourages a historical revamping of the literature through oil perspectives, amplify the centrality of oil in everyday social, economic and political life and the ecocritical approach is a clarion call for the action in the present to avoid a major societal collapse.

All it takes is the ability to listen to the multiple and unique perspectives of all the indigenous communities as their experience and knowledge arises out of the direct interaction with the environment around them and are rivulets of their culture, lifestyle, tradition and the war they wage for both planet and people to maintain the interdependence and coexistence of nature and culture. Silence is the powerful enemy of the oppressed, and it allows the hierarchy to exist and power structure to thrive as it makes the oppressor powerful. Hence, to break the silence it is important to believe that each individual plays a paramount role in mandating the balance of the ecosystem and carrying within them

forces that could envision and create a future that is green, sustainable, equitable and inclusive by making wise choices and putting them into action.

The current critical exposition on petrofiction can act as a resourceful standpoint for further research in this young and evolving, crucial field of study. Assessing the oil aesthetics and motifs prevalent in the literature of particular geopolitical domains, an intersection of gender and oil narratives, travel literature, oil-refugees and migration studies and a comparative study between oil scenarios of different nations through petrofiction can also be attempted to understand the varied global experiences. Petrofiction also offers a wide range of possibilities within the ecocritical approaches that can make the research socially relevant and sow the seeds for a mindful and inclusive action and change.