

Petro-culture as an Oppressor of Women and Nature: An Ecofeminist Reading of Nawal El Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*

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Abstract

Oil, arguably a crucial natural resource for the development of human civilization, has often been treated in petrofiction as a representation of male power and consequently an apparatus for repression of women. Historically, nature and women have been dominated at the hands of the petro-capitalist male societies. In Egyptian author Nawal El Saadawi's novel *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, it is found that the question of dominance over environment and suppression of women are inextricably linked. Oil is a commodity in the narrative which is used in an Islamic Gulf state as an agent to confine women in stereotypical roles and strip them of their unique identities as individuals. The petro-capitalism in the novel also works against creating a sustainable environment for the future generations. The female protagonist here fights for her dignity and right to freedom while facing the harsh realities of her social condition. This paper analyzes the text in order to expose the degeneration of oil societies and offers a view of how petro-cultural capitalism and politics, using religion as a shield, arguably work as key influencers behind the exploitation of women and nature.

Keywords: petro-culture, ecofeminism, petro-capitalism, petro-modernity, Islam

Oil has always been used to advance technological and scientific inventions with the goal of making people's lives comfortable on earth. Petroleum and its uses can be deceiving as masses of people might not be aware of the complete impact of abuse it brings forth. It sometimes goes undetected as the consumer culture creates a screen between the conditions of oil exploration, exploitation, and endangerment of nature. Allan Stoekl defines oil in the foreword of *Oil Culture* as not just a commodity but "the commodity" – not to be reproduced or replaced (xii), which is why oil is extracted from the ground and used indiscriminately from the very beginning. This natural resource is considered a so-called blessing with its power to drive the industries and households every day. But oil becomes a curse for the environment as illustrated in most oil fictions. In the essay, "Oil and World Literature," Graeme Macdonald analyzes the integral connection between oil and literature, which is often overlooked by readers:

Most oil fiction, for example, contains certain thematic preoccupations: volatile labor relations and ethnic tensions, war and violence, ecological despoliation, and political corruption. Storage and 'peak' anxiety over levels of reserves and remainders shapes events and chronological structure. Petrofiction's preoccupation with environmental justice is also well established, ensuring close relations with green debates around the world. (31)

Literature and popular culture raises awareness about the petro-reality of the twenty-first century and this paper looks at the text *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* with its concern over oil as an oppressor of nature and women. Here, oil acts as a double-edged tool in the hands of the existing misogynistic patriarchal social structure. On one hand, oil is a commodity at the point of being exhausted by the petro-capitalists and, on the other hand, it becomes an apparatus for the male oppressors

to suppress female identities. The story starts in a world immersed in petro-politics, corruption, dehumanization of women, and usurpation of natural resources. By looking at this anxiety, violence, and volatile social system brought about by petro-modernity, this paper will also examine male dominance associated with oil and its impact on women.

Ecofeminism and Oil

Nature has a vital connection with the human species, especially women. Historically, both nature and women have been subjected to male oppression and exploitation as commodities. Ecofeminism is the concept that discusses this relationship of simultaneous suffering of both women and nature, and the “Introduction” to *Feminism and Ecology* defines the relationship like this: “Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women” (Mellor 1). The exploitation of women and the planet itself is done by the men who, in the name of development and progress, victimize both. This is pointed out by Andrée Collard and Joyce Contrucci in the book *Rape of the Wild: Man’s Violence against Animals and the Earth*. Here Collard discusses how men thoughtlessly take pride in the destruction of nature by hunting for pleasure or keeping wild animals in cages to entertain spectators and earn money. The author points out that “Where the human hand has not greedily tinkered,” nature is at its best, “magnificent” and “awesome” (2). This book links ecology with women while vehemently opposing the exploitation of nature, animals, and of course women. Collard writes, “The identity and destiny of woman and nature are merged. Accordingly, feminist values and principles directed towards ending the oppression of women are inextricably linked to ecological values and principles directed towards ending the oppression of nature (137). Oil is one of the key natural elements that men exploit to exert power over everyone and everything.

Love in the Kingdom of Oil is set in an unnamed Gulf state, with the backdrop of the Gulf War and its destructions in mind. In the selected text, oil is used as an apparatus to cause destruction of female entities as well as nature itself. The protagonist in the story desperately looks for ways to end her plight. The novelist Nawal El Saadawi gives a brief introduction to her book’s setting:

In my novel, oil is the hero. The island in the story is floating on a sea of oil, completely under the control of an oil consortium. The president of the consortium is a foreigner who cannot speak a word of Arabic and the Kingdom is ruled by the tribal Holy Family and Representative of Allah on earth. (*Reader* 17)

The novel opens with an unnamed researcher from the Department of Archaeology who is kidnapped by a man while doing fieldwork. She is a married woman and the two men in her life – her husband and her boss – treat her like a piece of property, without a unique identity. The woman finds herself in a terrible, almost dystopian, place where there is oil everywhere, seeping through the ground or falling from the sky (24). The setting of the story shifts frequently and is often confusing, which is Saadawi’s way of portraying the protagonist’s inner struggle to deal with her reality. The male dominant social structure stifles the woman’s individuality, binding her with made up rules that work in favor of the masculine authority.

The story begins when the archaeologist leaves her home and no one knew where she went. There is a royal decree that prohibits women from going anywhere: “Women do not go on leave. If one does, then she does so in order to run some essential errand. Before going, she must obtain written permission either in her husband’s hand or stamped by her boss at work” (6). Both the boss and

the husband come to the police inspector's office to find out why and how the woman has gone on leave. A psychiatrist has been summoned in the office as well to deduce any hidden psychological issues behind this unimaginable offence of a woman going on leave, alone. The inspector degrades the protagonist's choice of profession – or the choice of having a profession at all – by saying, “A young woman throwing herself in a pointless job like collecting statues. Isn't that an indication of illness or even perversion?” (9). He continues his argument by noting that the archaeologist looks for gods and goddesses with a chisel because she does not have the male genitalia, which, in his opinion, equates to power, and seeks to attain control from the statues. This attitude can be related to the misconstrued practice of religion and belief in male supremacy over women.

The woman escapes the prison of her husband's household and the sexual abuse of her boss, but finds herself in another kind of prison when she is kidnapped. Her captor beats and tortures her with oil jars that she must carry like all the other oppressed women in the vicinity, where the man profits without paying any wages to them. The archaeologist cries out in pain when the man puts an oil jar on her head, “It's very heavy! It'll break my neck” (31). Here, oil is an active agent in subordinating the women because to put the jars on the woman's head, she must “bend over” in front of the male (31). Even though oil acts as an incentive to imprison women both literally and symbolically, the women are equated to oil in the novel. During police interrogation, the psychiatrist says that he finds oil and women to be very similar, “I think there is in her, as there is in other women, something resembling oil” (71). These words show how men desire complete control over the females as well as the natural resources of the world.

Saadawi brings in an image of patriarchal dominance over writing the fate of women around them. In the police commissioner's office there is “a new, oil-powered typewriter” (6) which writes the past, present, and future of the nameless researcher. But it is impossible to distance oneself from this modern world because, “To step outside of petro-modernity would require a step outside of media, including the contemporary printed book” (LeMenager 64). Oil is providing power to both men and media, and they are playing God, creating or destroying identities of women on a whim. Misguided masculinity can be considered responsible for the desire to control oil, nature, and women, which may eventually end up destroying the earth itself. Simone de Beauvoir's observation on man's attitude towards nature clarifies the argument when she writes:

Man seeks the Other in woman as Nature and as his peer. But Nature inspires ambivalent feelings in man, as has been seen. He exploits it, but it crushes him; he is born from and he dies in it; it is the source of his being and the kingdom he bends to his will. (197)

de Beauvoir explains here how human life springs from the biological mother and ends in Mother Nature and yet, men in their complacency, desire to overpower both. In a similar vein, Andrée Collard in her writing celebrates motherhood and women's biological link with nature as she writes:

Nothing links the human animal and nature so profoundly as woman's reproductive system which enables her to share the experience of bringing forth and nourishing life with the rest of the living world. (102)

Incidentally, this celebration of motherhood and women's so-called inherent connection with nature may be used against them, in order to annihilate their identities as individual human beings. Discussing the problems of ecofeminism, Victoria Davion brings in critic Riane Eisler who in “The Gaia Tradition and the Partnership Future” talks about societies worshipping goddesses instead of gods, argues that those societies were better at forming a sustainable co-relation with nature and

those are needed today to “solve the ecological crisis” (23). Eisler calls for the “feminine values” to “reaffirm our ancient covenant, our sacred bond with our Mother, the Goddess of nature and spirituality” (24). But this is problematic in limiting female entity only as a compassionate and sacred being.

Saadawi in her novel questions the role of a “proper woman” when the protagonist muses on her not giving birth, not being a mother, “She had been on strike against pregnancy from the moment her mother had died giving birth to her. She did not know what the point of pregnancy was. All women became pregnant” (75). The stereotypical role of women as merely bearers and nurturers of children is a creation of patriarchy. Yet, many ecofeminists emphasize the role of a female mainly as a caregiver. Brian Swimme in “How to Cure a Frontal Lobotomy” writes, “Women are beings who know from the inside out what it is like to weave the earth into a new human being” (18). This point of view problematizes identities of females in a patriarchy not unlike the petro-culture of *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*. Caring about nature and the environment does not necessarily have to be an inherently female trait. Environmental activism is historically linked with the politics of exclusion of women in the male dominated societies. Unfortunately, the female voices have systematically been omitted from the politics of activism by the oppressors, so that the domination of both women and nature can continue without any obstacles. Canadian scholar Sheena Wilson discusses the relationship between oil and feminism in “Gendering Oil: Tracing Western Petrosexual Relations”. In the essay Wilson invokes Heather Turcotte’s writings on the Niger Delta about women involved in petro-politics. Turcotte in her work theorizes that, women who stand up against destruction of nature and its resources “are naturalized as mothers and grandmothers in mainstream discourses – maternal protectors of the environment” (qtd. in Wilson 246). This way activist women are “rationalized as unpolitical and external to the political economy” (Turcotte 2011). Therefore, the idea is to not take their protests seriously; mainstream media narratives very conveniently follow this course of publishing policy.

The truth about the relationship between women and the environment can further be clarified by Robert R. M. Verchick when he points out that many organizations and movements that protest injustice done to women and nature have been successfully led by women, therefore “while ‘environmental justice’ describes an environment and a civil rights movement, it also describes a women’s movement, and, I suggest, a feminist movement” (63). He believes that when women fight for a cause, they do not easily give up. Instead, they put their passionate selves into creating a sustainable environment for future generations, a relationship of man and wild grounded in harmony, not exploitation. In the novel, the unnamed woman voices concern regarding female rights which can be directly linked to the question of environmental justice. Yet the male figures, dominating social structures in their deliberate denial, create a false narrative to continue with their neoliberal profit-seeking practices without acknowledging contributions by women activists.

Petro-capitalism and Dominance of Women

Sheena Wilson focuses on the Ethical Oil campaign and its effects on women in Canada as well as other oil countries in her essay, while analyzing how women protesting against exploitation of nature are termed “environmental terrorists.” She writes:

Within this paradigm, environmentalism, environmentalists, environmental science, and scientists – especially women and minority citizens acting on behalf of environmental agendas – become the targets of media attack, perceived not only as potential obstacles to oil extraction but also as threats to the proliferation of capitalism itself since oil and capitalism are considered symbiotic. (245)



Capitalism is one of the major reasons of injustice towards women and oil plays a very significant role in providing the necessary tools of oppression for the dominant male body. Since the media is an essential part of capitalism, they often tend to exclude women and their predicaments in petro-capitalist societies, and, on top of that, in a very crafty manner, objectify them to perpetuate capitalism's tyranny over them. Wilson unveils the hypocrisy of Western narratives of oil capitalism by focusing on the Ethical Oil billboards. In one of them, a woman is shown to be the mayor of Fort McMurray (an urban service area in Alberta, Canada, located in the middle of the Athabasca oil sands), and, in contrast, a burka-clad Muslim woman is being stoned to death and buried alive (250). The author critiques this form of "embedded feminism" which is used to "justify foreign policy, often in the form of political or military intervention by Western nations into the affairs of the Middle Eastern oil-rich nations – but it also validates the status of Western women" (251). But Wilson sees through the double standard of these narratives since the women in most twenty-first century Western societies repeatedly engage in struggles for their rights and survival of the environment, despite the proclamations of freedom and equal rights for all human beings given by the authorities of oil capitalist countries. Saadawi's text portrays how capitalism based on oil dictates fates of women and the helpless masses.

The researcher in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* is a prisoner of the oil culture where the despotic ruler decides what happens to the citizens of his country. The story gives details of oil companies that procure oil from the villages and their labor force are the women in abayas. Hypocrisy is evident in behaviors of the company men and the ones that govern women's lives. The rule is that a man can take four drops of an oil-like substance to quench their thirst while women only get two. The women who almost break their necks carrying oil jars, cook, clean, bear children, and look after the household, earn nothing in comparison to the exploitative men in power. Since men are the authoritative figures, they do not participate in carrying the oil jars themselves. This act is symbolic of the social discrimination in the oil-rich Gulf States and working without payment is a form of socio-economic and political slavery for the women. The captor of the researcher announces in plain terms what the patriarchy think of women's wages, "It's not right for a woman to work for money" (41). The King of the land is an autocrat and nothing happens without his knowledge and command. The oil exploration is providing money for him to lead a lavish life and his men keep on destroying the land. Capitalism is seeping into every crevice of the land and, as a result, nature is being destroyed. The women do not have access to a better life of education or income and those who do, get kidnapped or are tortured in their own homes.

The concept of power is not a simple one to elucidate. The complexity lies in the fact that not only does the top of a social structure hold power, but the lowest order does as well. In his seminal work *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault discusses the relationship between oppression and resistance when he says that power is not limited to any one individual or a group of people: "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (93). Then he goes on to define power:

One needs to be nominalistic, no doubt: power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society. (93)

Power is a strategy that in certain situations generates distinct behaviors and usually is very different from other circumstances in society. Every individual has a unique quality of power which is not

necessarily used as a destructive force. The archaeologist is frustrated by her own inability to take a stand and voice her rage against oppression, and that is why she directs her anger at the women of the oil village, believing their silent suffering to be the primary cause of the men's growing dictatorial power:

Women will remain in their state until the Day of Resurrection. Isn't there anybody to resist the oil? [...] Don't blame anybody apart from yourself if you are buried in this lake. The oil will dominate everything, and it will make its way to every place. (75-76)

The nameless protagonist is a spokesperson for Saadawi when her words relay the message of the cause this author has been fighting for throughout her life. Power to resist tyranny is not limited to political organizations only; every human being has an innate power that gives them the right to speak against injustice.

In the land where oil is abundant, with no water, no trees, and no refuge, the nameless woman resists silently, planning to escape from the place, trying to convince the other worker women in the oil factory to free their minds from the burden of carrying oil in a capitalist culture. Surprisingly, the other women the researcher wants to save have a power of their own. They have become so accustomed to the oppression in the oil society that it is unimaginable for them to break free from it. They antagonize the nameless archaeologist as soon as their paths cross, first by way of questioning her about the veil, then informing her about their knowledge of her getting beaten at home. There is a kind of surveillance operating in the village and no one is outside of it. The sustained dominance of the petro-capitalism makes people susceptible to becoming agents for the oppressors, as the suffering women have themselves become. Not resisting injustice is often considered as consenting to it. When asked why she does not open her eyes and take another look at the world, a neighboring woman answers the protagonist, "I used to kick a great deal until I became weary with kicking as well" (63). The choice of not raising a voice against injustice is what Saadawi speaks against in her novel. These women have given up hope to be free from the hellish state and seem blissfully unaware of the injustice done to them. The women do not have rights to education and earning wages, yet they do not resist the exploitation which makes the dictatorship more powerful. The citizens do not raise a voice opposing autocracy in fear, thus they suffer in silence. The power of the people is not exposed in the novel *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, which is the reality of the corrupt petro-capitalist society.

In Saadawi's novel, a very interesting form of power can be identified. While the autocratic ruler and his cohorts are at the top tiers of the social infrastructure, the common men, husbands, bosses also hold positions of authority. But it would be naïve to say that the women in that culture have nominal power over their lives and choices that are most of the time snatched from them. But it is important to acknowledge that, "Where there is power, there is resistance," which is "never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault 95). The archaeologist believed in the power of education. That is why she became a researcher and defied the male narrative about women and their roles in society. There was, what the oppressive male order would consider, defiance in her acting on her own free will. Her husband tried to force her to quit studying, and the woman despairingly thought to herself, "He would no sooner see her opening a book than he would shout. As is the book was another man who was taking her from him" (28). But she did not relent and went on to do what she wanted – searching for ancient archaeological artifacts, gods and goddesses buried in the earth.

This novel takes the readers to a place where there are “massive pipes” of oil and the men dictate the supply of oil that comes to the surface. Women in this Gulf State are shown as being timid, obliging creatures who wear black abayas or long cloths to cover their entire bodies. This is forced on them in the name of Islam to further suppress any human demand or desire of women. One woman’s question to the researcher, “Why don’t you veil your face? Have you no shame?” (17), clearly indicates the stern judgmental customs of the village. The abaya is black and hides the women’s identities, which Saadawi believes is a form of fundamentalist religious oppression. She writes, “The veiling of women is one of the most visible aspect of fanatic Islamic fundamentalist movements” (*Reader* 95).

While discussing ecology, Elizabeth Dodson Gray brings the theological rationale of the Great Chain of Being that establishes a structure of God’s authority over Man, and “men’s dominion over women, the darker races, children, animals, and wilderness” (qtd. in Salleh 71). This theorization might be true for many a religion but Islam promotes equal rights of men and women where Allah is the one force that can dominate Heaven and Earth, while men/women/animals are under his direct supervision. Saadawi discusses Islam in “Women and Islam” and she brings in an ayah from the Qur’an:

Men have the right to what they can earn by their efforts, and women have the right to work and to earn their living, since it has given them the same right as men to what they earn. (*Reader* 85)

Although Islam asks both men and women to take caution and dress modestly, there is no imposition on women’s rights to earn and keep property. A woman is seen as a “source of the cheapest labor in existence” by the oil capitalist economy, since “she does not own the proceeds of her labor” (*Reader* 89). This is true in the cases of the nameless females in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* where religion is used by the petro-capitalist culture, negating women’s existence and seizing their rights in production. This points to the fact that patriarchy imbued with oil power is responsible for the suppression of women, not Islam or religion, in this particular society.

In the novel women are treated as slaves. In this connection one is reminded of Ariel Salleh’s writing where she discusses how Marx and Engels name women and children as “the world’s first slaves” in patriarchy (73). This can also be found in Saadawi’s discussion about the leftist Marxist groups, where she illustrates how women’s liberation is considered separate from national liberation. The author writes:

[T]he class system was founded on the slavery of women and children in the family, and that the basic profits of the patriarchal class systems which prevail in our world, are rooted in the accumulation of surplus value deprived from the unpaid labour power of women and children. (97)

The Marxist ecofeminist viewpoint emphasizes the position of women as a productive force in any economy. Although the primary theorizations of Marx and Engels were not exclusively about women in societal structures, the issues come in various forms in their writings. Marx sees only men as one of the main components of labor, which is why he speaks of “Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre” meaning, labor is “the father” and nature is the “mother” in the production process (Salleh 71). Women here are seen not as initiators of production but merely a force of re-production that paves the way for the actual economic production; in plain words, women bear male children, nurture them so that they may work one day in production. The housework usually does not generate income, women’s labors are not “deemed productive” and for this reason Marxist feminists stand against wages-for-housework campaigns, fearing this system will continue the female labor to be hearth-bound and further arguments will be overlooked (Salleh 76).

The oppression on women intensifies because of the power that oil provides to patriarchy. Michael L. Ross, in his book *The Oil Curse: How Petroleum Wealth Shapes the Development of Nations*, discusses the role of oil in perpetuating male dominance over female bodies and identities. The author compares oil production and manufacturing of other products, and looks at ways they affect women's participation in work outside the home: "The scale of government's oil revenues, when transferred to households, reduces the supply of women looking for jobs" (117). While the garment sector employs women from lower classes, oil wealth provides sustenance and luxury to the men working in oil businesses, thus removing the need for females to go out and look for work. A significant number of women in most of the Arab countries, rich in oil wealth, do not have access to politics or positions of influence. Many critics from the Western world would argue that Islam is the major factor for the backwardness of and oppression on Muslim women, especially those of Africa and the Arab world, but Ross firmly believes, "More oil leads to fewer paychecks for women. And because entering the workforce is a critical route to political power, oil wealth can also diminish female influence in government" (118). Ironically, the conditions of women in the developed countries such as Canada or the United States of America are no different. It is not Islam, but the toxic masculinity coming from oil power which is responsible for oppression on women, all around the world.

In *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, the women carrying jars of oil are not included in the production process despite their taking the burden of motherhood, housework, and oil company work outside their homes. The nameless researcher desperately tries to make sense of her existence as a prisoner in the man's dominion and more likely telling herself that, "I am a human being like you, and I have rights," but a voice operating for thousands of years suppresses any claim of freedom by saying, "We have the rights of the men only" (39). This capitalist culture that exploits wealth procured from oil is exposed by Saadawi and she believes it to be responsible for the women's continued suffering.

In many cultures that depend mostly on petroleum and its wealth, women are tyrannized both by the burden of oil and the owners of oil fields. Saadawi repeatedly emphasizes the dangerous and destructive power of oil. She illuminates:

Oil was the reason for the Gulf War. Oil has been the reason for the continuing colonial aggression against us in the Arab world for the past half-century. Arab rulers, including the Gulf kings and princes, collaborated with the neocolonizers. Millions of women and men in our reign suffer poverty, ignorance and disease. My novel *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* is about that suffering. (Reader 7)

The reality here is that people long for wealth and power, which furthers the cause of petro-capitalist modern social orders. Maybe for this reason the author does not provide any indication of a future society that recognizes women as more than household goods and as a valuable force in economic production in the dystopian oil state.

Conclusion

This paper analyzes *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* which deals with the effects of petro-modernity – on the environment, women, and the future condition of the world – which is a grave concern for modern societies and their literature. The nameless archaeologist in the novel journeys towards an unknown future in quest for a better environment to fulfill her desire to be free, while in the process she becomes aware of the injustice done to her and others like her. This paper has focused

on the relationship between man and power; the dynamics of sexuality, power, and religion; and the power dimensions among oil, women, and the environment. The oppression of oil does not end in the narrative since the images do not directly point towards either an optimistic or a bleak future for humanity. The society in question can either be about oil, oppression, and a decaying wasteland or one with the hope of resistance, justice, or fight against the petro-oppression. Saadawi's ecofeminist critique of the oppression on women and nature carries a resistance to petro-cultural capitalism. This also raises awareness and sends a message of hope to the exploited in society, urging them to stand against women's rights violations and to put an end to the exploitation of the environment.

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