

Petro-Warfare and Departed Childhood: A Study of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* as a Petrofiction

S. Jeyasiba Ponmani, M.A.

Research Scholar
Department of English
PSGR Krishnammal College for Women,
Coimbatore- 641004
sibas miles@gmail.com
Phone: 9442831528

Dr. Narasingaram Jayashree, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Department of English
PSGR Krishnammal College for Women
Coimbatore - 641004
jayashree@psgrkcw.ac.in
Phone: 9952384783



Courtesy: www.amazon.com

Abstract

Since the beginning, fuel resources have been imperative to sustain life on earth. The benchmark of civilisation is noted by the evolution in the usage of fuel resources over a period of

time. Transformation from wood, tallow, coal, whale oil to fossil fuels saw the advent of modern industrialised society. The oil resources have played a significant role in designing the economic and historical construct of contemporary times. **Petrofiction** is the representation of the petroculture in literature. The greed for power and capital has modified oil from being an energy resource to a weapon for social, political and economic domination. The discovery of oil in Iran transformed the prospects of the country, and it became the battlefield of hegemony and politics. This paper aims to critically view Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical graphic novel *Persepolis*, as a petrofiction by analysing the historical setting and how oil propels the main action of the story. The consequences of the oil war, and how both the internal and external cues like trauma and war affect the behavioural pattern of the children, are studied using this graphic novel. Thus, the paper signifies the magnitude of the oil narratives, and their importance in the current anthropocene epoch.

Keywords: Marjane Satrapi, *Persopolis*, Petrofiction, Petroculture, Trauma, Oil war, Energy resources



Marjane Satrapi

Courtesy: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marjane-Satrapi>

The dynamics of modern life undoubtedly has been engineered around the presence of energy resources. The fossil fuels have seeped into all the nooks and crannies of the base and superstructure accounted for by the Marxist, the planes of interaction and interdependence of cultural, social, political and economic free-play of power and capital in the process of production. The discovery and the extraction of oil resources have rewritten the historical,

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 22:7 July 2022

S. Jeyasiba Ponmani, M.A. and Dr. Narasingaram Jayashree, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Petro-Warfare and Departed Childhood: A Study of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* as a Petrofiction

economic, political and cultural value of the geographical space, thereby redefining their stand in the global market. No other raw material like oil offered a hope of well-being for an entire nation, a dream that sadly stands unrealised and has instead become a curse that is, “...identified with wars, greed, and unspeakable power plays orchestrated by transnational elites” (Preface, Maugeri xi). Today black gold occupies the centre stage and society is reduced to a mere puppet in the hands of oil.

Energy Humanities is an interdisciplinary field that has paved the way for dialogues between energy resources and their representation in humanities. It evaluates the relationship between energy and modernity and highlights how in the current era of climate crisis, oil narratives cannot be overlooked. The representation of oil exploration, extraction, exploitation and the aftermath of the exhaustion in literature is classified under the genre called **petrofiction**, a term coined by Amitav Ghosh. The peak oil situation and the power politics surrounding the petro-resources along with their significant impact on the ecosystem have made petrofiction a significant narrative in the anthropocene epoch: “Oil commands authority in modernist cultures, but its quick combustion raises perpetual problems that make the commodity a source of both power and crisis.” (Schuster 199)

After successful surface drilling of oil in Pennsylvania around the 1900s using the technology developed by Colonel Drake, the modern oil industry was born. The world wars and the military strategies greatly reinforced the position and the importance of oil in the economy. This focused the attention of the world towards the Middle Eastern region, which by then has been recognised as the largest reservoir and supplier of oil. The coming of the roaring twenties and the rise in the consumers of automobiles saw the tremendous hike in the demand and supply of fossil fuels. In 1938, an American oil company drilled what would be the largest oil well in Saudi Arabia, thereby changing the geopolitical prospects of the Middle East. The abundance of oil resources in the Middle East, the non-renewable nature of the energy fuels and the scarcity of it in the global market forecasted an economic and political collapse. Thus, the Middle East became an important geographical location and the superpower nations like the United States were in an ever competitive battle for jurisdiction of the Middle East to curate the flow of oil in the international market. The perpetual combat for hegemony and the “resource curse” (Auty 1), along with significant involvement of the military forces have transformed the oil crusade into a war and the oil rigs into battlefields.

The epoch making petro-warfare includes Chaco war (1932-35) an armed conflict between Bolivia and Paraguay, Nigerian Civil War (1967-70) which is a cultural, ethnic and economic conflict between Nigerian government and Republic of Biafra over the control of Niger Delta for oil production, Persian Gulf War fought between 1980 and 1988 and 1990 and

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 22:7 July 2022

S. Jeyasiba Ponmani, M.A. and Dr. Narasingaram Jayashree, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Petro-Warfare and Departed Childhood: A Study of Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis as a Petrofiction

1991, the ongoing Niger Delta conflict and Heglig Crisis. The aftermath of oil wars have left environmental, cultural and economic casualties: “Most oil fiction, for example, contains certain thematic preoccupations: volatile labor relations and ethnic tensions, war and violence, ecological despoliation, and political corruption.” (Macdonald 31)

Marjane Satrapi is a French cartoonist, graphic novelist, illustrator, an author, and a film director who was born in Iran. She documented her growing up in Iran in the 1970s when the political conditions were unstable and the country was war torn. Her graphic novel, *Persepolis*, is an autobiographical record of events during and after the Islamic Revolution in Iran and an ode to her transnational identity. Tracing her journey from childhood to early adult years in Iran, her brief sojourn to Austria to escape the war and the homecoming, *Persepolis* offers a first-hand account of childhood lost amidst the oil wars and its aftermath. From the vantage point, the study of the historical, political and economical setting of the novel reveals how the wars in Iran are oil centric.

After several experiments, geologist George Bernard Raymond discovered oil in Persia (modern day Iran) in the year 1908. In the year 1980, in the wake of a revolution against the corrupt Shah Pahlavi, ten-year-old Marjane was introduced to the political history of Iran by her parents, her royal lineage, the coming of oil and the conflicts that arose during the current war. Marjane is the great granddaughter of the emperor of Iran who was overthrown by Reza Shah, a low ranking soldier, with the help of the British in order to establish a republic. Britain’s ulterior motive behind this deal was to gain autocratic control of oil, “You just give us the oil and we’ll take care of the rest” (Satrapi 21). Thus, the western forces in their quest for oil resources entered the historical narratives of Persia and resulted in the resource curse which was determined by an abundance of natural resources and low economic status because of exploitation.

The prospect of new wealth turned the tables for Iran, and it started the production of oil with subsidiaries supported by the United Kingdom during the time when the British Navy shifted from coal to oil powered engines. The success of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) was not happily received by Iran, as it only gained 16 percent of the total net profit, thereby creating a political rift. During the Second World War, when Britain and Soviet Union invaded Iran to acquire control over the liquid gold, they exiled Reza Shah and placed Reza Pahlavi on the throne as the latter was much more amicable with the colonisers. The rise of nationalism led the Iranians to vote in order to nationalise their oil resources at the time when Mohammed Mossadeh was their prime minister. After failing to subvert Mossadeh, the Britain and American forces confederated to accomplish the Iranian Coup d’état in 1953 and succeeded in reinstating Reza Pahlavi to the throne and exercising hegemony with consent on the oil resources.

The exhaustion of resources, the corruption and the discontent among the public led to a revolt against the monarchy, in which Marji's parents actively participated. In the year 1979, Shah Pahlavi stepped down as the ruler and was granted refuge by Egypt. Her father opines about the rebellion in Iran that, "In any case, as long as there is oil in the Middle East we will never have peace" (Satrapi 43). After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, in the year 1980 when she was ten years old, Iran was invaded by Iraq under the command of Saddam Hussein, the "second invasion in 1400 years." (Satrapi 79)

Iraq started to bombard Iran, and one of the first places to be attacked was the oil refinery at Abadan. The citizens of Iran rushed to gather their basic amenities to survive the uncertainties of war. One of the primary needs is the fuel and Mr. Satrapi collected all the soda cans to fill petrol. The gas station was crowded, and they refused to fill the soda cans because the fuel must be available for everyone: "Every morning I have to drive 40 miles so that you can have a peaceful life. How am I going to do that with no car? Huh? That's why I need cans for gasoline! Can you understand that? The car runs on gas!!!" (Satrapi 88) It is an ironic situation, for a country that is rich in oil is forced to ration it.

The Iraqi attack on the oil refinery of Iran and the construct of peaceful life in times of war based on the availability of petrol is a vivid portrayal of the oil centric life as pictured in the novel. Iran refused the help offered by Saudi Arabia, another Middle Eastern country that is rich in oil, during the reconstruction of the war torn country. The oil wars changed the prospects of Iran, and it is reflected through the value of the Iranian passports. In the initial days after the discovery of oil, the wealth of Iran made the European countries roll out their red carpets to welcome the Iranians, later with the turn of events that initiated the petro-aggression and the terrorism had put Iran under scrutiny and, "now as soon as they learn our nationality, they go through everything, as though we were all terrorist. They treat us as though we have the plague" (Satrapi 205). Thus, oil shapes the destiny and identity of the people associated with its spatial and cultural presence.

The aftermath of the oil war is the displacement where millions of people fled in search of better life. Poverty, famine, scarcity of resources and epidemic are other looming threats of the oil war. The never ending war makes Marji leave Iran. She is sent to Austria by her parents to lead a normal life, experience better living conditions and receive quality education. The historical context and the predominant presence of oil as a dictator shaping the fate of the nation and the oil wars as a result of greed and the resource curse experienced by the Iranians are realistically portrayed. The author uses the story of childhood through a graphic representation of life to show the impact of the oil complications that ensued as a residuum. Thus, this work becomes a significant narrative of petrofiction.

The situation dictated by oil has a direct effect on civilisation. The oil wars as a result of greed for wealth and power has led to ethnic cleansing, displacement, refugee crisis, destruction of the ecosystem and has now transformed from an energy to a humanitarian crisis. Life between the oil wars and the living space evaded by instability and insecurity made it a dangerous zone for children. The trauma of war can easily alter the children's concept of self, identity, the way of the world and their behaviour. The difference in the living conditions between the developed industrial countries and those of the developing countries, "are even more extreme for children than for adults." (Wintersberger 3)

The economic inequalities that differentiate the rich from the poor countries display a vast difference in the living conditions. While the children of rich country lead a life with security, education, cultural activities and peace, the children of impoverished nations suffer from hunger, destitution, lack of education and healthcare, war and child labour. The conditions of oil war ridden Iran portrayed in the novel facilitate the study of the effect of war in the attitudinal development of the children. A lot of children lost their families during the Iran-Iraq oil war and were suddenly thrust with heavy responsibilities even before they could regain control of their own life. Thus, lost childhood became one of the many casualties of the oil war.

The immediate response to war including the defensive phase and the coping mechanism as exhibited by Marji works in close association with events in her environment. The oil war and the Islamic Revolution shaped the thought process, decision-making and the value system of the children represented in the book. Pardisse, a friend of Marji lost her father to the Iraq - Iran War and the way she coped up with her loss by writing a letter addressed to her dad filled with promises to take care of the family, reflects how a child has suddenly evolved into an adult in times of uncertainty. Pardisse, at a young age, had to make a tough decision and took up the role of her father and provided for the family. Marji responded to the situation by offering words of comfort to her friend. Similarly, many children lost their childhood to war because of being uprooted, orphaned or worse, being dead. The children from poor economic backgrounds were recruited to fight in the frontline, lured with the promise of better living conditions. The resistance to the regime led to a series of mass executions, and the children were also killed without any morality or justice. The cruelty of the war and the terror of the big picture affects the development of the behaviour of the children stranded in the chaos. The children were introduced to poverty, death and rebellion even before they could lose the innocence of childhood.

The environmental cues can signify an action that is about to occur or the outcome of an already transpired event. Albert Bandura, in his proposition of the social learning theory, puts forward how both the internal factors like drive and desire and the external factors like the

environment and circumstances impact the behaviour of the individual being. This is termed as reciprocal determinism. According to Bandura, “Behavior is an interacting determinant, not simply an outcome of a “person-situation interaction”” (Bandura 9). The trauma of war puts Marji and her friends in a state of shock, fear and anxiety. Taking the model from the adults and the hostile environment, she and her friends wrestled with the trauma by smoking and organising forbidden parties as a means to assert their freedom and resistance amidst strict rules. The chastity of childhood is lost in the war. Marji showed the loss of childhood by smoking her first cigarette, “With this first cigarette, I kissed childhood goodbye.” (Satrapi 117)

Marji as a child witnessed the severity of war and the age factor prevented her from being useful or involved. The minor acts of backyard rebellion organised by children which included dressing up as Che Guvera, Fidel Castro and Trotsky and shouting slogans were small actions that made them feel useful in times of crisis. Her age prevented her from donating blood to victims of war and that made her feel “angry and embarrassed” (Satrapi 120). These emotions were invoked by the events in the environment and, as an outcome, alter the behavior of the children.

The violence of war leaves an individual emotionally disturbed. The modelling of the behaviour based on the external war and the internal turmoil makes Marji and other children of Iran gain a perspective of life that is much more advanced than the children belonging to the developed, privileged and peaceful countries. The bombing of Baba-Levy’s house was a turning point in Marji’s life. As a fourteen-year-old, her suffering and anger could no longer be contained and that made her a rebel devoid of any fear. At a very young age, she stood up against the strict and patriarchal rules imposed in the name of religion and war. She emulated her radical parents very often, and that in turn made her fearless and unconventional. It also largely shaped her outlook of the world and rights for women in a patriarchal setup: “Modeling influences can weaken conventional inclinations by exemplifying novel responses to common situations.” (Bandura 49)

Marji coped with the stress of war and Islamic Revolution by feeding her intellect. Before the age of fourteen, she had read books on dialectical materialism, children of Palestine, the Vietnamese War and about the revolutionaries of Iran. War, justice and peace became the three important concepts that surrounded the idea of life during her childhood. Divine interventions were portrayed through her conversations with God, and it is one of the survival mechanisms to bring consolation, solace and mental peace.

One of the immediate responses to war is fleeing, and Marji like many of her friends was sent away from Iran to lead a peaceful life. At the age of fourteen, she leaves for Vienna with the

harrowing experience of war. Decamping offered a hope for a peaceful future, an expectation and the consequence of it that determined the response to the current circumstances. She carried with her the dream of peaceful life and good education yet the reality of being a Third World refugee plunges her into an identity crisis. The act of trying to fit in and the nostalgia of the homeland became an important part of the psychological turmoil that she endured in Vienna: “I should say that at the time, Iran was the epitome of evil and to be an Iranian was a heavy burden to bear.” (Satrapi 197)

Marji loses her motivation to live and spirals into drugs and toxic relationships to grapple with her anxiety and identity crisis. Her experience of being homeless and ending up in a hospital as a consequence of her actions made her feel guilty of all the sacrifices done by her parents back home amidst the war to provide a peaceful life. Her questions about identity, the discrimination faced by her in the new country, the effect of living far away from family, separation from parents at the young age, the physical environment took a toll on her mental health. She and all the other children coming from precarious situations differ in their level of maturity. The process of maturation and responsibility in the life of children affected by war made them advanced and far ahead than any normal and privileged child. The timeline of growth varies largely based on the environmental circumstances and has a direct relationship with the psychological process in altering the behaviour. This interlinking in behavioural style is termed by Albert Bandura as social cognitive learning behaviour. The children in *Persepolis* gain maturity, growth and behaviour models from the war initiated by abundance of the oil resources, its effect on their mental health and survival in times of uncertainty.

Today, the war over the oil crisis is more than just an economic crisis or power politics. It has transformed into a humanitarian issue with high mortality rates as a result of living in nations with resource curse. The resulting trauma has equally affected the combatants and non-combatants. The children who have lost their lives to the war have become the symbol of failing humanity and free will. The broken promises and the rate of fatality and disability as a result of war have obliterated the faintest hope of a better future for many Third World countries. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has become a common condition among the children who have been dislocated, displaced and orphaned by war. The United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) reports that over four hundred million children live in the countries affected by war and other conflicts. Although a variety of plans are devised to help children, their accessibility is questionable.

Consolidating all the effects of the black gold rush and its aftermath, the ultimate question of the looming future is that, will the war over oil ever end? Although the artistic and scientific speculations provide a post oil future, the question about whether the wars ever end has no

optimistic answer. Since the dawn of civilisation, fighting for resources has been the way of the world. The industrialised civilisation is largely dependent on the non-renewable energy resources. The contemporary oil centric life combined with other social, economic, political and environmental factors only foreshadows a catastrophic future. The need for energy shift will not only impact the environment, but also can put an end to the oil wars and all the humanitarian crisis following it. The peak oil and the petro-war must be acknowledged as a major threat in this era of crisis and necessary steps for energy descent must be taken to sustain life on this planet. The shift to alternative greener and renewable energy sources will definitely lower the dependence on the carbon based fuels and it will have a significant impact on their status in the economic, political and social sector. All these sectors must work interdependently to maintain stability and balance:

The world is changing before our eyes --- dramatically, inevitably, and irreversibly. The change we are seeing is affecting more people, and more profoundly, than any that human beings have ever witnessed. I am not referring to a war or terrorist incident, a stock market crash, or global warming, but to a more fundamental reality that is driving terrorism, war, economic swings, climate change, and more: the discovery and exhaustion of fossil energy resources. (Heinberg 1)

The graphic representation in *Persepolis* lay bare the crude reality of the resource curse, the warfare, displacement, identity crisis, trauma, and the childhood amidst oil wars. Thus, *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi is a petrofiction and a consequential work of oil narrative that opens up about the petro-war, its aftermath on vulnerable sects of people like the children and calls for an immediate action to prevent societal collapse and global catastrophic risk.

Works Cited

Auty, Richard M. *Sustaining Development in Mineral Economics: The Resource Curse Thesis*. Routledge, 1993.

Bandura, Albert. *Social Learning Theory*. Prentice- Hall, 1977.

Heinberg, Richard. *The Party's Over: Oil, War and the Fate of Industrial Societies*. Clairview Books, 2003.

Macdonald, Graeme. "Oil and World Literature." *American Book Review*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2012, pp. 7-31. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/abr.2012.0079.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 22:7 July 2022

S. Jeyasiba Ponmani, M.A. and Dr. Narasingaram Jayashree, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Petro-Warfare and Departed Childhood: A Study of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* as a Petrofiction

Maugeri, Leonardo. Preface. *The Age of Oil: The Mythology, History, and Future of the World's Most Controversial Resource*, The Lyons Press, 2008, pp. xi-xviii.

Satrapı, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood and The Story of a Return*. Vintage, 2008.

Schuster, Joshua. "Where is the Oil in Modernism?" *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, Edited by Sheena Wilson et al., Mc-Gill-Queen's UP, 2017, pp. 197-214.

Wintersberger, Helmut. "The Rights of the Child and the State of the World's Children." *Childhood and Trauma: Separation, Abuse and War*, Edited by Elisabeth Ullmann et al., Translated by Mary Heaney Margreiter and Kira Henschel, 1st ed., Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 1999, pp. 3-14.
