

# Oil – A Metaphor of Fear and Inhumanness in John H Green’s *Seven Men in a Tank*

Roopalakshmi V<sup>1</sup>, Dr Rajasekaran V<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>*School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Chennai*

**Abstract-** In an age that follows a rampant agenda of moving towards *climate sustainability*, insisting on the immediate transition to hydroelectric, solar, nuclear, wind, and geothermal as alternatives to coal, oil, and natural gas, has failed to articulate much about the oil violence happening underneath the skin. More than any other commodity of natural resources, oil exemplifies the concoction of mysterious and crucial to the modern world. On the other hand, in oil-producing states, the Promethean qualities (secrecy, guardedness, defensiveness and corporate ventriloquism) of oil create waves of crime and social dysfunction. Therefore, this piece of writing is interested in the discourse of violence that happened in an oil town and its repercussion on the Sheriff’s life, delineated with a tinge of discussing oil as a symbol of strange, primitive, alienation, or inhumanity that industrial modernity has brought to the surface.

**Keywords:** petroculture, violence, oil, industrial modernity, petrostates.

## INTRODUCTION

“There is an important sense in which the only thing that doesn’t seem to matter anymore is matter.”

- Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*  
The widespread protests and phrases like “Oil Kills,” “War for Oil,” and “No Blood for Oil” reveals that in the twenty-first century, people have started realizing the degree to which oil has shaped the existing networks of power, economy, and the environmental damages attached to it. This newfound awareness about oil - its rapid growth, ceaseless mobility (cars, motorbikes, trucks), and infrastructures (pipelines, rigs, roads....), indicates that oil has indeed defined the modern everyday life of the previous century. The twentieth century is when coal dominated the industrial fuel world; the discovery of oil and its by-products, like automotive gasoline, automobiles, and polyvinyl chloride, have revolutionized the habits and mobility of modernity. This modernity, as Amitav

Gosh voiced out, that these epochal shifts in energy, economy and social organization have not been translated much into the world of art and literature, especially in American writings. In the panoramic sweep of modernist writing, Joshua Schuster says the petroleum sources and by-products like automotive gasoline are hardly visible. Yaeger calls this invisibility of oil in modernist writings as “energy invisibilities may constitute different kinds of erasures” (Wilson, 199). Thus, this writing attempts to add dimension to one such erasure as in – oil, a synecdoche to the dark tropes of violence, fear, abuse, guilt and inhumanness. Creating a discourse on these aspects, the paper has taken John H Green’s short story *Seven Men in a Tank*, published in 1925.

## *The Rise of Oil Fiction – a genre*

Supplementing to the invisibility as mentioned above, the veiled violence of oil was rarely off the front pages of the press during the nineteenth century. Hence, it is not surprising that Green’s story got published in a pulp magazine that’s focal offering is to publish stories that are taboo, too extraordinary, and too outrageous. Also, the writers, at the dawn of the coal-to-oil transition, rather than focusing on the natural resource base, were drawn to economic issues, the risks and anxieties associated with modern money and fears about the property. Shortly, the material ubiquity of oil and petroleum derivatives (which turned out to be the centre for the new unique structure of commodity distribution, consumption, and manufacturing in the late twentieth century) gained public currency – explicitly erupted in early petroculture literature. Consequently, the *Petrofiction* genre is likely to emerge between the end of the First World War and the start of the 1950s, the time when American petroculture emerged.

## PETROMODERNITY AND PETROFICTION

The International Energy Association has released data stating that the need for fossil fuels (coal, oil, and natural gas) in 2050 will increase by up to 60% of the current requirement of the world. The expanded landscape of Petro-politics caught everyone's attention by its operations- extraction, accumulation, circulation and consumption- creating a particular form of 'oil modernity' marked by rapid social, cultural, political, and economic transformation. For instance, the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and the Persian Gulf War (1990-1991) have made the world consider oil; as the core substance of modernity and progress in western countries and manifested itself as a monster to many in the Gulf region. In Iran, oil has emerged as a mirage of its future prosperity that has never become a reality to many Iranians. Thus, traits like - Secrecy, guardedness, defensiveness and corporate ventriloquism have soon become the hallmarks of the oil industry. These Promethean qualities of oil in oil-producing states create waves of crime and social dysfunction, which slowly began reflecting/shadowing in the literary sphere. Daniel Yergin's book *The Prize* provides abounding information on the industry's corruption, criminality, crude's exercise of power, and the worst frontier capitalism. Graeme MacDonald, a prominent petroculture author, believes that one of the most critical elements of modern oil encounters is its *transformative ability*. The most famous petrofiction that reveals this transformational capacity is Upton Sinclair's *Oil* (1927). The novel is about how a gold and silver digger eventually becomes an oil tycoon and highlights the direct impact of the oil industry in southern California on the development of Californian culture and Hollywood. *Greenvoe* (1972), another novel by a Scottish author, traces how the arrival of the oil industry ruins the life of a fisherman. *Men in the Sun* (1962) by Ghassan Kanafani, a Palestinian writer, talks about the transformation of local culture by the oil encounter resulting from the need for workers and manifests as a process of forced modernization. However, the work of critical theory in humanities and social sciences tries to look over the apparatus of enlightened modernity, exposing the multiple fictions of this narrative and bringing to light the truths of modernity that are concealed by the shiny drama of progress, which boasts every year is better than the one before it. Contributing to this, the recent advent of research interest in energy humanities has started to

make explicit discourse relating energy to environmental, economic, technological, and political aspects, imagining energy as the input into the modern social and material process that does not alter its character or nature very much. In the interim, through their research, scholars like J. Watts and Esthie Hugo have brought how the account of the invisibility of oil violence that has fundamentally shaped the communities and political regimes of petrostates like Ecuador and the Southeast Nigerian Delta. Still, the invisibility of energy associations with memory, trauma, guilt and fear has not been explored much in Energy Humanities research, especially with oil. To bridge this gap, the paper explores the change in the nature of an individual psyche living in one of the most intricate oil towns of his times - *Arkansas*.

## DISCUSSION

### *Seven Men in a Tank – a brief introduction*

The story "Seven Men in a Tank" is narrated from the perspective of the Sheriff in the oil region near Smackover, Arkansas. He is requested to look into the seven corpses found at the bottom of the recently emptied oil storage tank. After witnessing the bodies, the Sheriff goes insane with guilt and confesses at the end that he has arrested these seven men while playing poker to get a commission on the fines. He then ordered them to squeeze themselves into the utility hole in an empty oil tank until he could return with a police van, leaving it unclear how they got into the tank and why they may have been murdered. Unexpectedly, the tank fills oil from a fresh well while the Sheriff is away, drowning the crew. Eventually plagued by the "indescribable hate, anguish and fear" he imagines the men suffered, Sheriff quotes Omar Khayyam and shoots himself.

### *Oil Town – A Synecdoche to Dark Tropes*

Green's oil field, both physically and culturally, has brought out the dark effects of using oil and a tank as an unexpected means of death, having violence, inhumanity and guilt as its undertones. There are dystopian and nightmarish connotations to the industrial modernism of the "tank farm." "Twenty-five enormous black steel tanks squatted in accurately spaced rows. Each contained "two corrugated iron engine houses and a small field office and 55,000 barrels of crude oil." It is not surprising that oil is

associated with death in this situation because humans seem to be pictured as marginalized. Oil is connected to the visuals of tanks as well. Oil also has a hidden undercurrent because of the tank picture. The boys in the tank were concealed even after oil had poured over them and engulfed them in deadly fumes. This concealment increases the oil's concealment beneath the landscape of the story. When the Sheriff imagines the tank form, he combines the inhuman modernity of the tank with the inhuman prehistory of oil itself, saying, "a huge mass of steel gave one the impression of a giant black reptile or prehistoric monster. Silent... Impressive.... but Evil." In the oil sector, there is a resurgence of the suppressed or disguised fundamental inhumanity. This is reflected in Sheriff's portrayal, who initially treats the man's murder easily because the oil field has "harden a man to almost anything." This immoral and amoral environment ironically pervades and weakens justice: "I stand high over the whole state as an officer of the law," he says, describing it as "one of the toughest oil fields the country has ever seen." As Mumford says, "that part of human activity wherein, by an energetic organization of the process of work, man controls and directs the forces of nature for his own purposes" (Mumford, 2000). The Sheriff stands for a profoundly estranged person, set on his Nietzschean self-development, numbered to empathy with others. The story brings the readers to the clear idea that: oil is a symbol of strange, primitive, alienation, or inhumanity that industrial modernity has brought to the surface. In alignment with Marx's belief that the past "weighs like a nightmare" on the living, Sheriff's encounter with the bodies has instigated guilt in him, which further results in "found his body sprawled over the table, a smoking automatic in his hand and a bullet hole through his temple" (Green, 189). However, oil also serves as a synecdoche: an emblematic but actual component of oil fields' dismal petroculture as a whole. Omar Khayyam's quote, "Hell is the reflection of a soul on fire", captures the confluence of foreboding notions and feelings in the modernist tragic oil genre. Hell is experienced in this narration and is a creation of humanity, resulting from our collective spiritual alienation and the individual soul's joyful feasting on a dehumanized, degraded environment. Oil is the sign and synecdoche of that fire in modern history. Even if the genre presents a fundamental challenge to the heroics or repression of capitalist

petroculture, it risks deifying it as an inevitable outcome, a tragedy without a happy ending. Oil casts a looming, blatantly inhuman shadow in Green's pulp horror narration. Although it was initially unpopular, today's oil tragedy is worth reviving because it has a new resonance in the wake of the public oil crisis, the coming of peak oil, and the difficulty of imagining a world without oil.

## CONCLUSION

With the rampant agenda of moving towards *climate sustainability* without colossal effect upon the economic, political and social disruption, the current energy scientists and researchers insist on transitioning to hydroelectric, solar, nuclear, wind, and geothermal as alternatives to coal, oil, and natural gas. As a result, the global economy had to be rebuilt, and the geopolitical consequences of the global north's dependency on oil had to be reorganised. Whereas, in a real parallel universe, we are still unable to identify, define, foresee or map the violence of oil and its effects on nature and humanity. An examination of humanity's current traps within and an aggravation of the adverse impact of the phenomenal opportunities provided by oil and gas in the petro-privatized culture of late globalized capitalism can thus be sparked by a three-page story of one man's guilt and corruption contemplating his selfishness reflected in this writing.

## REFERENCE

- [1] Khoshnevis, R. (2021). *Crude Oil and its False Promises of Modernization: Petroleum Encounters in Modern Iranian Fiction* [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Amsterdam]. Accessed on 14 Jul 2022
- [2] Green, H, J. (1925). *Seven Men in a Tank*. Retrieved August 12, 2022, from [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org). Pp 187–190.
- [3] Hugo, E. (2021). A "Violence Just Below the Skin": Atmospheric Terror and Racial Ecologies in Ben Okri's *in the City of Red Dust*. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. Pp 270–283. Accessed on 22 Aug 2022.
- [4] Watts, M. J. (1999). Petroviolence: Some Thoughts on Community, Extraction, and

Political Ecology. Retrieved from *California Digital Library*. Accessed on 17<sup>th</sup> Oct 2022.

- [5] Szeman, I & Boyer, D (Eds). (2017). *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*. John Hopkins University Press.
- [6] Szeman, I., Wenzel, J & Yaegar, P (Eds). (2017). *Fueling Culture: 101 words for Energy and Environment*. Fordham University Press. pp 255-258
- [7] Wilson, S., Carlson, A & Szeman, I (Eds). (2017). *Petroculture: Oil, Politics, Culture*. McGill-Queen's University Press. Pp 162-197
- [8] Roopalakshmi V, a Full-time Internal Research Scholar at Vellore Institute of Technology in Chennai, India. Her broad research interests include Environmental Humanities, Energy Humanities, Psychoanalysis, and Ecocriticism.
- [9] Dr Rajasekaran V, Senior Assistant Professor in the School of Social Sciences and Languages at Vellore Institute of Technology, Chennai, India. English Language Teaching, Trauma narratives, Scriptotherapy, Disability Studies, Environmental Humanities, and Semantics are his research areas of interest.