

Beyond the Oil Encounter: The Evolution of Petrofiction in Literary Studies

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Abstract: Petrofiction has emerged as a significant field within the Environmental Humanities, examining how petroleum shapes literature, culture, politics, and ecological consciousness, bringing together literary studies, ecocriticism, and energy studies to examine how petroleum has shaped modern life and literature. Beginning with Amitav Ghosh's influential essay *Petrofiction* (1992), scholars have gradually expanded the field by exploring the relationship between oil, capitalism, labour, migration, gender, environmental degradation, and literary form. This paper traces the development of petrofiction over the past three decades by reviewing the major debates, concepts, and theoretical approaches that have shaped the field. It shows how petrofiction has moved beyond the study of novels about oil to become a broader method of understanding the cultural, political, and ecological impact of fossil-fuel dependence.

Keywords: Petrofiction, Environmental Humanities, Energy Humanities, Ecocriticism, Fossil Fuels

INTRODUCTION

Petrofiction might seem like a novel field in the landscape of literature but the term was coined by Amitav Ghosh in his essay titled *Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel*, published in *The New Republic* in 1992. Although literary representations of petroleum have expanded across different regions and traditions, petrofiction remains a relatively young and conceptually evolving field within literary studies. These narratives examine the environmental impact and how it affects the larger population wherein people from other countries migrate in order to find employment in the oil industry while the indigenous communities are displaced and they have to settle some place other than their home (be it a different town or a different country altogether). While these narratives explicitly investigate these interventions, the development of petrofiction in the landscape of the Anthropocene has been silent and often rhizomatic, similar to its usage in the modern world.

The scale of dependence on petroleum is invisible to the passive consumers. Petroleum is primarily used to produce transportation fuels (gasoline, diesel, jet fuel) and heating oils. However, as a raw material and through the process of distillation, it is also a building block for thousands of everyday products like plastics, synthetic rubber, asphalt, and petrochemical feedstocks used in cosmetics, clothing, and medicine. While the implicit role of petroleum, the representation of petroleum and its dependence hasn't been explicitly explored in literature in view of the scale of dependence. Petroleum is simultaneously the condition of modernity and one of literature's least visible protagonists. From electricity to transportation, oil plays an integral role in the development (and dismantling) of the modern world. The scholarship may be limited but it has broadened to various fields within literature (from feminism to modernity).

Given the rapid growth of this scholarship, there is a need to examine how the field has developed and the directions it has taken. While individual studies have explored specific aspects of petroleum and literature, relatively few have traced the intellectual evolution of petrofiction over time. This paper addresses that need by reviewing the major debates and theoretical developments that have shaped petrofiction from its emergence in the early 1990s to the present. The paper aims to track the development of petrofiction as a representation of petroleum in literature to becoming a more interdisciplinary field exploring the various facets of society that are affected by it.

Instead of investigating individual publications and providing individual contribution, this paper traces the major intellectual shifts in the shaping of petrofiction over the last three decades. It traces the field from Ghosh's coinage of the term "petrofiction" to its engagement with Energy Humanities, ecocriticism, world literature, feminist criticism, and environmental justice, showing how petrofiction has developed into a wide interdisciplinary framework.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The emergence of petrofiction as a distinct field of literary inquiry reflects a growing recognition that petroleum is not merely an economic resource but a material force that shapes culture, politics, literature, and everyday life. While earlier studies largely approached oil through its explicit literary representations, recent scholarship has expanded the field by examining the invisible infrastructures, extractive networks, and environmental crises through which fossil capitalism organizes contemporary existence. Consequently, petrofiction has evolved from a niche category of resource literature into an interdisciplinary framework informed by Energy Humanities, world literature, ecocriticism, political ecology, and postcolonial studies.

The intellectual foundations of the field can be traced to Amitav Ghosh's seminal essay *Petrofiction* (1992), which questioned the surprising absence of petroleum from modern fiction despite its centrality to twentieth-century political and economic life. Ghosh argues that petroleum exceeds the conventions of realist narrative because it functions as a dispersed network rather than a localized

event; extraction, transportation, consumption, pollution, and capital accumulation occur across different geographical locations, making oil structurally resistant to representation (Ghosh 19–31). This insight transformed petrofiction from a thematic category into a theoretical problem, prompting scholars to investigate why fossil capitalism remains simultaneously ubiquitous and culturally invisible.

Building upon Ghosh's intervention, Stacey Balkan and Swaralipi Nandi argue that petrofiction should not be understood as a narrowly defined literary genre but as a critical methodology capable of revealing the material operations of petroleum across literature, politics, and ecology. Rejecting deductive approaches that privilege texts explicitly concerned with oil extraction, they advocate an inductive mode of reading that traces petroleum's dispersed presence through infrastructures, labour, migration, commodity chains, and environmental degradation (Balkan and Nandi 1–10). Their reconceptualization significantly broadens the scope of petrofiction by positioning it as a method for reading the contemporary petrosphere rather than a category of oil novels alone.

The theoretical expansion of petrofiction coincides with the emergence of Energy Humanities, which shifts critical attention from individual fossil fuels to the broader relationship between energy systems and cultural production. Rather than treating energy as a passive historical backdrop, scholars argue that different energy regimes fundamentally organize literary forms, political institutions, and social life. Patricia Yaeger proposes that literary history itself should be periodized according to dominant energy sources, while Imre Szeman contends that energy constitutes a fundamental category of literary analysis because fossil fuels shape not only economic systems but also cultural imagination and historical consciousness (Yaeger; Szeman). Similarly, Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer conceptualize Energy Humanities as an interdisciplinary project examining how energy infrastructures produce political, cultural, and ecological relations, thereby establishing the theoretical foundation upon which much contemporary petrofiction scholarship rests.

This shift has also encouraged scholars to rethink the relationship between petroleum and capitalist modernity. Timothy Mitchell argues that energy transitions are fundamentally political rather than technological, demonstrating that oil replaced coal because it enabled greater control over labour, weakened workers' collective power, and facilitated new forms of capitalist governance (Mitchell). Extending this critique, Jason W. Moore's concept of Cheap Nature explains how capitalism depends upon the continual devaluation of land, labour, energy, and ecosystems before extracting surplus value from them (Moore). Petroleum therefore emerges not simply as an energy source but as a mechanism through which extractive capitalism reorganizes both human and non-human life. This political-economic perspective is further reinforced by Dominic Boyer's concept of energopower and G. C. Unruh's theory of carbon lock-in, both of which explain how fossil-fuel infrastructures become institutionally entrenched, making petroleum dependence appear inevitable despite escalating ecological crises.

Another significant development within petrofiction scholarship concerns the question of literary form. If petroleum exceeds the representational capacities of realism, scholars increasingly argue that alternative aesthetic strategies become necessary. Stephanie LeMenager contends that fossil-fuel modernity demands new petro-aesthetics capable of representing dispersed infrastructures, ecological entanglements, and planetary scales of violence (LeMenager). Likewise, Wendy Walters demonstrates that speculative fiction renders pipelines, extraction, and ecological catastrophe visible by exaggerating rather than merely documenting reality, suggesting that fantasy paradoxically becomes a more effective form of realism for representing fossil capitalism (Walters 80–98). Similarly, Simon Ryle argues that fragmented and nonlinear narratives mirror the complexity of petroleum's geopolitical networks, while Grazielle Frederico demonstrates how magical realism exposes the normalized violence of extraction by unsettling conventional distinctions between the ordinary and the extraordinary. Collectively, these interventions establish that petrofiction is as much a question of narrative form as it is of thematic content.

Recent scholarship has further expanded petrofiction beyond environmental degradation to include questions of gender, labour, migration, and social reproduction. Sharae Deckard demonstrates that fossil capitalism depends upon gendered and racialized reproductive labour, thereby situating petroleum within feminist political economy (Deckard 41–58). Similarly, Helen Kapstein's formulation of petrofeminism examines how intimacy, romance, and affect are themselves shaped by fossil-fuel modernity (Kapstein 59–79). Attention to labour is equally evident in Ashley Dawson's analysis of worker struggles across successive energy systems, while Swaralipi Nandi, Micheal Angelo Rumore, and Benyamin foreground migrant labour, displacement, and transnational mobility as constitutive features of contemporary petroleum economies. These interventions significantly broaden the geographical and conceptual scope of petrofiction by demonstrating that the violence of oil is experienced not only through ecological devastation but also through precarious labour regimes and global migration.

Finally, recent studies increasingly emphasize petroleum's enduring afterlives. Stacy Alaimo argues that oil should be understood through its persistent residues of toxicity, waste, and contamination rather than solely through extraction and consumption. Likewise, studies by Henry Obi Ajumeze and Stacey Balkan reinterpret polluted landscapes, abandoned infrastructures, and environmental ruins as archives that preserve the historical memory of extraction. Such scholarship aligns closely with Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, emphasizing that the most devastating consequences of petroleum unfold gradually across generations rather than through spectacular environmental disasters. Collectively, these studies reposition petrofiction as a mode of archival reconstruction capable of documenting the long temporalities of extractive violence.

Although petrofiction scholarship has developed sophisticated frameworks for analysing extraction, petroculture, energy systems, labour, and environmental degradation, comparatively little attention has been devoted to the bureaucratic and documentary infrastructures through which extractive power is administered. Existing studies primarily foreground ecological devastation, resource capitalism, and cultural representation, while the everyday practices of documentation, registration, permits, identity

papers, legal archives, and state bureaucracy remain underexplored. Addressing this gap would extend petrofiction beyond questions of extraction alone, demonstrating how fossil capitalism is sustained not only through material infrastructures but also through the administrative technologies that regulate access to land, resources, citizenship, and mobility.

ORIGIN OF PETROFICTION

Petrofiction as a term emerged in 1992 with the publication of the eponymous essay by Amitav Ghosh. The underlying issue that Ghosh encountered was the lack of literature being written about petroleum and its impact on the ecosystem (and in turn, on human life). Ghosh strives to understand the lack of scholarship in relation to the socio-political environment of the world. The lack of scholarship, according to Ghosh's 1992 essay, suggests that the pivotal, driving role of oil in global dominance and empire-building is actively suppressed in cultural memory to maintain a convenient status quo.

In 1992, America's stature as a world superpower solidified with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Though there was widespread unrest and an atmosphere of recession in America, America was also involved in the Gulf war of 1991 which was fought under the guise of liberating Kuwait but was a rehearsal that set stage for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Most of these wars have a mission to establish "peace" but the underlying capitalist intentions are not hard to trace. America, post-2003, maintains deep financial and regulatory control over how Iraq's oil revenues are spent. The revenue from Iraq's oil business is accumulated in New York and its use is approved by the USA.

The wars have one thing in common: the meddling of the USA. It is only natural to expect a plethora of literature written on this Oil Encounter from an American perspective, as they are in a position of power to dictate and swing the perception of the public and compel them to believe the "peacemaker" rhetoric. But American writers were immersed in representing the suburban life of the American town. The zeitgeist of Generation X realism was in its initial phase while science fiction served as an escapism from real-world problems, hence, no literature with petroleum (or extraction at large) was produced during this period in America. Prior to the emergence of petrofiction as a recognised field of study, some novels had already explored the role of oil in context of society. These works are known as oil encounter novels because they focus on the arrival of petroleum and the changes it brings to people, places, climate, and communities. Rather than treating oil as just another natural resource, these novels show how it influences politics, economic growth, labor, and everyday life. Although they were written before the term petrofiction was coined, they established many of the issues that later became central to the field.

One of the earliest examples is Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* (1927), which is set during the California oil boom and examines issues such as industrial growth, corruption, and class divisions. Another significant work is Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* (1984), which illustrates how the discovery of oil alters the social and cultural life of desert communities in the Arabian Peninsula. These novels did not create a literary movement on their own, but they showed that oil could be an important subject for fiction. It was not until Amitav Ghosh's essay *Petrofiction* (1992) that scholars began reading these novels together and discussing them as part of a larger collection of literature focused on petroleum and its effects on the modern world.

EVOLUTION OF PETROFICTION

After Amitav Ghosh's essay in 1992, the study of petrofiction began to grow in new directions. Scholars were no longer interested only in why oil was missing from literature. They also started asking what oil does to people, societies, and the environment. Stacey Balkan and Swaralipi Nandi argue that petrofiction is more than a literary genre. They see it as a way of understanding the environmental problems created by extraction and fossil-fuel-based development. They also suggest a different way of studying petrofiction. Instead of starting with theories, they encourage scholars to begin with the literary texts themselves. Another point they raise is that oil often remains hidden. It is extracted in one place, used in another, and its pollution is felt somewhere else. Because of this separation, most people do not see how deeply petroleum shapes everyday life.

Ghosh continues this discussion in his later work. He explains that oil is difficult to represent because it does not fit the structure of a traditional novel. Most novels follow a central character or a single event. Petroleum does not. It moves across countries, industries, and markets. The damage it causes is also spread over different places and long periods of time. Ghosh also points out that oil is present in many ordinary objects. Roads, plastics, paint, cosmetics, fertilisers, and medicines all depend on petroleum. Because oil is part of everyday life, people often stop noticing it. This leads Ghosh to ask whether the invisibility of oil is really a problem of literature or whether it is built into the way petroleum capitalism works.

Timothy Mitchell studies petroleum from a political point of view. In *Carbon Democracy*, he argues that the move from coal to oil was not only about finding a better fuel. It also changed the balance of power between workers and employers. Coal miners could stop production by going on strike. Oil was much harder to control because it travelled through pipelines and shipping routes. This made workers easier to replace. Mitchell therefore shows that every energy system also creates a different political system. His work encouraged petrofiction scholars to think about oil as a source of political power as well as a source of energy.

As the field grew, scholars also explored new themes. Sharae Deckard and Helen Kapstein look at petroleum through the idea of petrofeminism. They show how oil economies affect domestic labour, care work, and social mobility. Wendy W. Walters takes a different approach. She argues that speculative fiction can sometimes explain petroleum better than realism. By using imagination, these stories make hidden systems of oil easier to notice. Walters also suggests that polluted rivers, abandoned pipelines, and contaminated land can be read as archives because they preserve the history of extraction and environmental damage.

Henry Obi Ajumeze develops this idea further. He argues that oil always leaves traces behind. These include abandoned drilling sites, polluted landscapes, damaged ecosystems, displaced communities, and long-term illness. Literature helps bring these traces together. It records histories that are often ignored in official documents. Ajumeze also believes that such damaged landscapes cannot be described through the language of progress. They need a different way of being represented, one that recognises pollution, decay, and loss.

More recent studies have widened the field even further. Stacey Balkan examines migrant labour and shows how the effects of oil reach far beyond oil fields. Simon Ryle argues that petroleum changes history and political conflict, not just the economy. Scott DeVries brings attention to Spanish American petrofiction, while Grazielle Frederico shows how magical realism can reveal the violence of extractive capitalism. Together, these studies show that petrofiction has grown into a broad field of research. It now connects literature with energy, politics, labour, history, and the environment.

FUTURE SCOPE OF PETROFICTION

The growth of petrofiction over the last three decades shows that the field is still developing. Early scholarship was mainly concerned with one question: why had literature paid so little attention to oil? Since then, researchers have shown that petroleum is much more than a source of energy. It shapes politics, labour, migration, capitalism, memory, and even the stories societies tell about themselves. As the field has expanded, new questions have also emerged. These questions are likely to shape the next phase of petrofiction research.

One noticeable shift is taking place outside literature itself. The world is slowly moving away from fossil fuels. Governments are investing in renewable energy, industries are changing, and climate policies are becoming more common. Literature is responding to these changes as well. While petrofiction has helped us understand societies built on oil, future studies can ask what happens when those societies begin to change. Can literature imagine a future beyond petroleum? Or will oil continue to shape the future in less visible ways? These are questions that deserve more attention.

At the same time, the geography of petrofiction also needs to become wider. Most studies still focus on the Middle East, the United States, and the Niger Delta. There are good reasons for this because these regions have long histories of oil extraction. However, petroleum has also shaped many other parts of the world. Countries such as India, Indonesia, Brazil, and Mexico have their own stories of extraction, industrial growth, and environmental conflict. Their literature can bring new experiences into petrofiction studies. Looking beyond the regions that dominate the existing scholarship will make the field richer and more representative. Another change can already be seen in the kinds of questions scholars are asking. Earlier research often focused on oil fields, pipelines, refineries, or environmental disasters. More recent work has started to look at the ordinary presence of petroleum. Oil is present in plastic, medicines, synthetic clothes, cosmetics, electronic devices, and many other things people use every day. Because these objects are so familiar, their connection with petroleum often goes unnoticed. Literature has the ability to make these hidden relationships visible. This opens an interesting direction for future research because it shifts attention from spectacular events to the everyday experience of living in a petroleum-based world.

Climate change will almost certainly remain one of the biggest concerns in petrofiction. Many recent novels deal with floods, droughts, wildfires, rising temperatures, and environmental loss. These stories are usually discussed as climate fiction, but they are also connected to fossil fuels and extractive economies. Instead of treating petrofiction and climate fiction as separate fields, future studies can explore where they meet. Such an approach can offer a better understanding of both the causes of environmental crisis and the ways literature responds to it.

CONCLUSION

Petrofiction has developed into an important area of research within the Environmental Humanities. What began with Amitav Ghosh's critique of the absence of oil in literature has grown into a broad and interdisciplinary field. Over the years, scholars have shown that petroleum is not simply an energy resource but a force that has shaped modern societies in political, economic, cultural, and ecological ways. As a result, petrofiction has moved beyond studying the representation of oil in literary texts to examining wider questions of energy, capitalism, migration, labour, environmental justice, and climate change.

This review has traced the major developments in petrofiction scholarship and highlighted how the field has expanded over time. Early studies focused mainly on the visibility of oil in literature and the narratives of extraction. Later scholarship widened its scope by bringing together ideas from energy humanities, ecocriticism, postcolonial studies, and political ecology. More recent research has further broadened the field by exploring themes such as petroculture, environmental justice, gender, migration, and the everyday presence of petroleum. These developments show that petrofiction is constantly adapting to new theoretical approaches and changing global realities.

Despite this progress, the field still offers many opportunities for further research. The transition towards renewable energy, the growing impact of climate change, the expansion of digital technologies, and the increasing focus on the Global South are opening new directions for literary scholarship. As these issues continue to reshape contemporary society, petrofiction will remain an important framework for understanding the relationship between literature, energy, and the environment in the current landscape of ever-changing world.

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