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Oil, a Double-Edged Sword: Nnedi Okorafor's *The Popular Mechanic* and *Spider the Artist* as Petrofiction

V. Hari Prasad* and S. Jayanthi

Department of English, PSG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore – 641014, Tamil Nadu, India;
vhariprasad228@gmail.com, jayanthi_s@psgcas.ac.in

Abstract

This article delves into understanding the emerging trend of petrofiction in literature, specifically examining how the short stories of writer Nnedi Okorofor, such as *The Popular Mechanic* and *Spider the Artist* in the short story collection Kabu Kabu, can be categorised as 'petrofiction'. The emerging genre of petrofiction interacts with cultural narratives, environmental issues, and science fiction. By means of a thorough examination of Okorafor's stories, this research aims to reveal how these tales capture the spirit of petrofiction and add to its developing discourse. In *Spider the Artist*, the protagonist Eme forms a distinctive connection with a mechanical spider designed to guard and safeguard oil pipelines, highlighting the challenges associated with establishing human-technology relationships and the repercussions of cutting-edge technology falling into the wrong hands. *The Popular Mechanic*, on the other hand, examines the global consequences of oil consumption and the struggle against ecological destruction in Nigeria. Both the short stories revolve around the villagers in the unknown rural part of the Nigerian Delta and explore the effect of pipeline installations and the role of oil in their lives and society. This study emphasises the power of literature as a tool for bringing issues to light and imagining different futures in the face of the difficulties brought on by the fossil fuel era.

Keywords: Environment, Oil Literature, Oil Pollution, Petrofiction

1. Introduction

In the modern world, humans' everyday activities are highly dependent on transport. Oil plays a vital role as fuel for bikes, cars, trucks, ships, aeroplanes and trains. After the UN Climate Change Conference meeting, several countries agreed to implement electric energy as fuel for transport, but the change is too costly, and the environment is degrading. So, oil was considered a liquid treasure by all the countries, which resulted in countries around the globe starting to conquer countries that possess oil, favour those countries, build reservoirs for centuries, and even make wars for it. Oil acts as an agent to make multinational companies like Shell, BP, Chevron, Total Energies, Aramco ("Why Oil Is a Humanitarian Issue for Nigeria's New President")[1], and others grow their wealth multiple times. On the other hand, oil extraction, oil transportation, and oil pipelines cause accidents that affect the environment and disrupt normal lives.

2. Petrofiction

'Petrofiction' is a literary sub-genre that examines how oil affects people's lives, communities, and the environment. It explores the relations between people and petroleum, frequently focusing on issues like political conspiracy, environmental destruction, and conflicts between local governments and oil companies. Ghosh had mentioned on his website that 'Petrofiction' is a review of the Jordanian-Saudi writer Abdelrahman Munif's Cities of Salt, which he describes as a "monumental five-part cycle of novels dealing with the history of oil"[2]. This genre reflected the international scope of the oil business by portraying stories of gushers, the drilling process, and the sociopolitical complexities that surround oil discoveries. Petrofiction is a significant and developing genre in modern literature because it reflects the tremendous effects of our present world's reliance on oil on many aspects of existence. Several noteworthy literary works and critics have surfaced in the field of petrofiction, a

*Author for correspondence

genre that explores the complex link between civilisation and petroleum. Works that highlight the significant influence of oil on human lives and landscapes include George Mackay Brown's *Greenvoe*, Upton Sinclair's *Oil!*, John Updike's *Rabbit Is Rich*, Chris Abani's *Graceland* and *Cities of Salt* by Abdul Rahman Munif. The discussion surrounding this genre has been greatly influenced by critics like Imre Szeman, and back in 1992 by Ghosh as "petrofiction". Ghosh enlarged the definition of "petrofiction" to include broader societal connotations and coined the word in 1992. Amy Riddle explores how fossil was exploited for capital in her works, such as *Oil on Water* and *Cities of Salt*, whereas Graeme Macdonald's work emphasises the transformative potential of petrofiction in works like *Oil!* and *Greenvoe*. By inviting many viewpoints on the interaction of oil, literature, and society, editors such as Swaralipi Nandi and Stacy Balkan, with their anthology *Oil Fictions: World Literature and our Contemporary Petrosphere*, have further broadened the topic. Collectively, these literary pieces and critics provide a multifaceted picture that sheds light on the intricate relationships that exist today between culture, petroleum, and human experience. Though oil pollution invariably affects the surroundings at a higher level, in developing countries like Nigeria, the economy of middle and lower-class people's lives is affected, which is the backbone of a country's growth.

3. Oil Pollution in Nigeria

Nigeria's oil sector confronts formidable worldwide obstacles that affect the nation's ecology and economy. Nigeria's oil production costs, which range from $25 to $40 per barrel, make it less competitive than Saudi Arabia and other nations where expenses are less than $5 per barrel. Nigeria's capacity to meet global demand and pricing is hampered by this cost difference, which might result in a 70% reduction in oil production by 2040 if the world quickly moves away from oil to keep global warming to 1.9°C. Furthermore, because oil makes up over 80% of Nigeria's exports and 50% of the country's budget, the country is vulnerable to shifts in the oil market and a downturn in global oil demand. Oil extraction has had a major negative influence on the environment in Nigeria, where it has resulted in substantial humanitarian concerns and conflicts within local communities due to oil spills, pollution, and environmental degradation. These difficulties draw attention to the intricate relationships that exist between Nigeria's oil sector, social progress, environmental sustainability, and economic stability, establishing Nigeria's oil crises as a crucial subject with broad global ramifications. In the world of literature, several writers such as James Howard Kunstler, Helon Habila, Steven Amsterdam, Chris Abani, Karen Tei Yamashita, Abdul Rahman Munif, and others started to focus on oil pollution and tried to shed light on it.

4. Nnedi Okorafor

One of the popular, emerging, and environment-focused writers is Okorafor. She is an American-Nigerian novelist who is well-known for her fantasy and science fiction writings for readers of all ages. African myth, culture, and history are the focal points of her distinctive sub-genres of science fiction and fantasy, which she named African futurism and Africanjujuism. Young black girls are frequently portrayed as superheroes in Okorafor's works, which also explore social themes including political violence and racial inequity. Her oeuvre, which includes books like *Who Fears Death*, *Zahrah the Windseeker*, and the *Binti trilogy*, has won several awards. Deeply entrenched in African mythology and traditions, Okorafor's storytelling combines parts of traditional narrative with magical and futuristic themes. Her varied upbringing, influenced by both her American and Nigerian roots, has a big impact on the stories she writes, which are meant to increase diversity and representation in the science fiction and fantasy genres. She had also written short story collections, in which *Kabu Kabu* was one of the famous books because of its varied themes. This article particularly focuses on how she employed the petrofiction in two of her works, *Spider the Artist* and *The Popular Mechanic*.

5. Okorafor's Narrative of Petrofiction

Nnedi Okorafor's short stories *The Popular Mechanic* and *Spider the Artist* explored issues of sophisticated technology, artificial intelligence, and the effects of oil exploitation in Nigeria. The detailed storylines combine science fiction with environmental activism. In *Spider the Artist*, the main character Eme develops a special bond with a mechanical spider made to protect and maintain oil pipelines, illustrating the difficulties in forming relationships between people and technology as well as

the consequences of advanced technology getting into the wrong hands. The narrative questions ideas of agency and control by showing the spiders as both creatures capable of breaking orders to protect people like Eme and instruments of their masters.

"I suspected that he sold the fuel and oil on the black market; he would bring some of the oil home, too" (Okorafor 91)[3].

On the other hand, *The Popular Mechanic* explores the worldwide effects of consumption of oil and the Niger Delta region's fight against ecological destruction, highlighting female heroes who overcome petroviolence and creates means of empowerment and resistance within their communities devastated by oil. In addition to offering theoretical perspectives on how oil may affect society and the environment, these tales also give futuristic themes and resistance to the damaging effects of oil extraction. In the story, *The Popular Mechanic*, the story revolves around the small family of Anya, her father and her mother. Petroleum is all around them as they even take it from the leakage and sell it and live from its profit.

"One of the pipelines in the forest burst! Free fuel" (Okorafor 146)[4].

In underdeveloped countries like Nigeria, the lives of lower-class people are highly dependent on the things around them. Though Nigeria exports barrels and barrels of oil, the citizens of Nigeria haven't benefited from it. It was the multinational companies that gained most of the profit. Most Nigerians suffer from a shortage of fuel, as the extraction of oil is controlled by big corporations. Irrespective of the tribe or community or gender, everyone in the surroundings where oil pipelines were laid waited for the leakage of oil and sold the collected oil with whatever they possessed, from small bowls to big barrels.

6. Oil's Deadly Legacy: The Degradation of the Environment

In the story, *The Popular Mechanic*, people gather at the oil leakage site to collect it for their livelihood. Unfortunately, the oil caught fire, and it was blasted, killing 99 and leaving 15 wounded. Due to several problems, oil leakage caused several deaths in the Nigerian Delta region. According to the statistical data on the website, worldometers, Nigeria holds 37,070,000,000 barrels of proven oil reserves as of 2016, ranking 10th in the world and accounting for about 2.2% of the world's total oil reserves of 1,650,585,140,000 barrels.

In Nigeria, 12,998 oil spills were recorded, and 585,959 barrels of oil were spilt both in water and on land ("Nigeria Oil")[5]. The pollution spoiled the surroundings and made it barren land. According to a 2017 study, 16,000 babies in a 10-kilometre radius surrounding oil spill sites perished within a month of their births in 2012 alone. Though the companies were making efforts to monitor and control the leakage, the illegal oil extraction and oil theft increased the degradation of oil pollution. The oil spill in the Nigerian delta destroyed the farmlands, which can't be used for further cultivation. "Cassava and yam farms yielded less and less each year" (Okorafor 87)[4].

As farming was the main occupation of the villagers in the Nigerian delta, the oil spills stagnated as pools destroyed the entire village, and so they are mentioned as "pipeline people" or "oil village" in *Spider the Artist*[3].

7. Conclusion

In summary, the analysis of Nnedi Okorafor's *The Popular Mechanic* and *Spider the Artist* as petrofiction has shed light on the complex interactions between literature and the socio-political, cultural, and environmental realities shaped by the petrochemical sector. A careful analysis of these stories reveals that petrofiction is a potent medium for examining the complex effects of oil production and consumption on many environments, societies, and personal lives. Okorafor contributes a variety of viewpoints and ideas to the petrofiction genre by fusing elements of African spirituality with modern progress. This challenges conventional narratives and broadens the conversation on energy-related topics. More importantly, this article dealt with oil pollution, which is a rising concern for environmental destruction in the 21st century. The emergence of new area studies like 'petroficion' acts as a tool of communication to shout out the importance of maintaining the environment to develop a pollution-free future world. Literature inspires us to envision and work towards a more equitable and sustainable future, in addition to encouraging us to consider the past and present.

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