Soulless Buildings, Bosses, and Bodies: Oil Wealth in the Contemporary Saudi Novel

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Introduction: Oil, the Fuel of Society?

In the last two hundred and fifty years, fossil fuels fundamentally affected the human experience of self, time, and place.[1] Imre Szeman, a leading figure in the environmental humanities, describes it as follows: 'We wear fossil fuels like a second skin, as part of the very make-up of who and what we are.'[2] Of the fossil fuels – coal, oil, and natural gas –, it is primarily the importance of oil as a global energy source that is difficult to over dramatize. Oil has shaped modernity in regard to its economy, politics, and culture. It is of so much importance today that scholars speak in terms of 'petromodernity' and 'petroculture'. For Stephanie LeMenager, petromodernity refers to 'a modern life based in the cheap energy systems long made possible by petroleum'.[3] According to Szeman, petroculture means, 'simply, the society we inhabit today – a global society made possible by the energies afforded by burning fossil fuels.'[4]

Petroleum is not distributed evenly around the world. Almost half of the world's proven reserves are in the Middle East, including Iran but excluding North Africa.[5] Only fifteen countries account for more than 75 percent of the world's oil production and hold about ninety percent of oil reserves.[6] The Arabic country highest on the list is Saudi Arabia. Hence my decision to focus on this country. For Saudi Arabia, petroleum is the main pillar of its economy and the cornerstone of its development. According to the latest International Monetary Fund data, oil directly accounts for more than 40 percent of overall gross domestic product (GDP), close to 80 percent of exports, and nearly 70 percent of fiscal revenues.[7] Non-oil activity also relies highly on government spending financed by oil revenues.[8] The economic impact of the oil industry has played a determining role in transforming Saudi Arabia's 'once traditional Arab existence into a contemporary cosmopolitan lifestyle'.[9] The income from the oil industry has contributed significantly to social reform through the provision of increased education, 'which has arguably done more to bring about social and cultural change in Saudi society than any other single factor.'[10]

Oil affects not only the economy and thus daily life, but also the cultural production. Noura Algahtani states in her article on Saudi literature that a novel is an ideal vehicle for documenting changes that arise from rapid modernization.[11] Therefore, I chose to focus on oil and Saudi literature in this thesis. I examine three

[1] Heidi C.M. Scott, *Fuel: An Ecocritical History* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 4
[2] Imre Szeman, 'Foreword,' in *Gasoline Dreams: Waking Up from Petroculture*, ed. Simon Orpana (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), ix.
[3] Stephanie LeMenager, 'The Aesthetics of Petroleum, after Oil!,' *American Literary History* 24/1 (2012), 60.
[4] Simon Orpana, *Gasoline Dreams: Waking Up from Petroculture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), vii.
[5] Gordon Atwater, Priscilla McLeroy, and Joseph Riva, 'Petroleum,' *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 7, 2022, https://www.britannica.com/science/petroleum, accessed April 12, 2022.
[6] Atwater, et al., 'Petroleum.'
[7] International Monetary Fund, *Saudi Arabia: Selected Issues*, September 9, 2019, https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2019/09/09/Saudi-Arabia-Selected-Issues-48660, accessed April 19, 2022, 4.
[8] IMF, *Saudi Arabia*, 4.
[9] Noura Algahtani, 'The Impact of Socio-Cultural Contexts on the Reception of Contemporary Saudi Novels,' *Sociology Study* 6/2 (2016), 105.
[10] Algahtani, 'The Impact of Socio-Cultural Contexts,' 105.
[11] Ibid. I often refer to (petro)modernity and modernization in this thesis. I am aware that these are contested terms. Despite their popularity, there is no widespread consensus concerning the precise meaning. They are often used to generalize images that summarize the various social life transformations. The essential utility of the idea of modernization itself can be questioned. Nevertheless, in the absence of more accurate terms, I have decided to use them anyway, as much of the research I refer to in chapter one also uses them. In

cases of twenty-first century literature from Saudi Arabia: Abdo Khal's *Tarmi bi Sharar* (2009), translated as *Throwing Sparks*, Raja Alem's *Tawq al-Hamam* (2010), translated as *The Dove's Necklace*, and *Al-Hala al-harija li-l-mad'u* (2017) written by Aziz Mohammed and translated as *The Critical Case of a Man Called K*.

For this project, a new field must be entered: energy humanities. This field is part of the larger field of the environmental humanities. Environmental humanities explores the intertwining of nature and culture from a variety of perspectives. It addresses questions of value, ethics, climate justice, and environmental politics. The focus of energy humanities is on a specific issue concerning today's environmental challenges: energy.[12] It concentrates on climate change and the violence of resource extraction. Jamie Jones explains that the energy humanities research is uniquely suited to 'imagining a future beyond fossil fuels and of understanding exactly how and why we have become so deeply enmeshed in destructive energy systems.'[13] The field is emerging around recent publications by Stephanie LeMenager, Amitav Ghosh, Daniel Worden, Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, Sheena Wilson, and Patricia Yaeger, among others. These scholars base their research on the idea that the supply of a particular kind of fuel has specific influences on a given culture, its landscapes, cultural values, ambitions, and fantasies. Petrocultural studies in particular is concerned with how 'entire cultures and global communities make sense of oil, the cultural representation of oil, and its ability to shape cultural production, expectations, and values.'[14] What is unique about petrocultural scholars, is that they position oil, 'as the fulcrum around which many of today's most pressing social, economic, and political issues must be analyzed and understood.'[15] In the introduction of *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, the authors state: 'As the field of energy humanities develops, it will need to pay greater attention to the uneven impacts of fossil fuels on human communities.'[16] Specifically that is what this thesis seeks to contribute to. Three novels will be analyzed in order to answer the research question: In what way do the 21st-century Saudi novels *Throwing Sparks*, *The Dove's Necklace*, and *The Critical Case of a Man Called K* reflect on the impacts of oil wealth?

There has been a lively debate on oil and culture for two decades, as can be read in chapter one. Nevertheless, the publications focus almost exclusively on the American context. Even if there are studies on energy and the Middle East, academics have tended to exclude the Arabian Peninsula.[17] As Rosie Bsheer

this thesis, modernity is associated with individual subjectivity, rationalization, the emergence of bureaucracy, rapid urbanization, the rise of nation-states, and accelerated financial exchange and communication. I employ modernization as a 'dichotomous' theory: it will serve to conceptualize the process whereby 'traditional' societies acquire the attributes of 'modernity'. Modernization then becomes a process and a transition, e.g., from mirative economies to technology-intensive, industrial economies. See also: Dean C. Tipps. "Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A Critical Perspective," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* Vol. 15, no. 2 (March 1973), pp. 199-226.

[12] See for a clear overview of this new field: Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer, *Energy Humanities: An Anthology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2017).

[13] Jamie Jones, 'Beyond Oil: The Emergence of the Energy Humanities,' *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* 6/2 (2019), 155.

[14] Joanna Allen, 'Light, Energy, and Gendered Oil Gluttony: Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel's Challenges to Petrocapitalism,' *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 66/1 (2020), 102.

[15] Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, and Imre Szeman (eds.), *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press), 4.

[16] Wilson, et al., *Petrocultures*, 11.

[17] An example of a recent publication on an Iraqi novel is: Susan Comfort, 'Resource Wars and Resourceful Resistance: Gender Violence and Irreal Oil Environments in Two Global Novels by Women,' *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 66/1 (2020), 20-51. Comfort analyzed the novel's representations of war as accounts of the missing stories of oil.

describes, there is a gap in the general academic literature on Saudi Arabia: 'Despite recent advances in scholarship, Saudi Arabia is largely absent from Middle East Studies.'[18] According to Bsheer, this is due to the limitations on access to the country and persistent Orientalism that views the entire Middle East as static. Bsheer describes the popular and scholarly perceptions that Saudi Arabia is 'as a vast desert, a place particularly lacking not only history but also politics and culture.'[19] This thesis is countering this Orientalist idea that Saudi Arabia has no culture and heritage. Despite the short history of Saudi prose, compared to the genre of poetry and the long history of the novel in other Arab countries such as Egypt, Lebanon, and Iraq, Saudi novels begin to capture a notable share of the space of Arab narrative.[20]

In academia, several justifications have been formulated as to why literature analysis can be used to interpret social, economic, religious, or political phenomena. The premise of this research is that literary texts can both reflect and expose the social forces operative in society at a particular time. Stephen Greenblatt has written extensively on the relationship between culture and society. Greenblatt states that the social and aesthetic domains are inextricably linked. He coined the term 'circulation of social energy': an interaction between literary and non-literary means of expression within culture that can be viewed as a dynamic whole.[21] For Greenblatt, literary texts are vehicles of power serving as useful objects of study because they contain the same potential for power and subversion that exists in society.[22] Litererature is part of larger discursive structures and can offer clues to the ideological contradictions of a given period. Art is not autonomous, but a product of a conflicting society. Literature also has a special role within energy humanities. Roman Bartosch states that literature can bridge a gap between factual knowledge 'and emotional or moral understanding'.[23] For Heidi Scott, novels are 'fictional perspectives that encompass, amplify, and elaborate upon reality', making them unique tools for considering fuel.[24] According to Scott, literature is 'potentially experimental, imaginative, speculative, political, ecological, and activist-oriented'.[25] The complex character of literature gives it the capacity to bring an issue such as fuel to the fore.[26]

The choice of the novels is based on three considerations. First, to have a clear and demarcated corpus, winners and nominees of the Internal Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) are chosen. The prize aims to reward excellence in Arabic creative writing and to encourage the readership of Arabic literature internationally through translation.[27] With their translations, these novels act in an international field, having a wide Saudi and international readership. Second, there is a thematic motive: these three novels are the only novels

[18] Rosie Bsheer, *Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia* (California: Stanford University Press, 2020), 7.
[19] Bsheer, *Archive Wars*, 8.
[20] Moneera al-Ghadeer, 'Saudi Arabia,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Arab Novelistic*, ed. Waïl S. Hassan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 397.
[21] Stephen Greenblatt, 'Towards a poetics of culture,' in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Veeser (London: Routledge, 2013), 3.
[22] John Brannigan, 'Introduction: Literature in History,' in *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 6.
[23] Roman Bartosch, 'Introduction to Climate Change Fiction,' in *Research Handbook on Communicating Climate Change*, eds. David C. Holmes and Lucy M. Richardson (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020), 318.
[24] Heidi Scott, *Fuel: An Ecocritical History* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 19.
[25] Scott, *Fuel*, 19.
[26] Ibid.
[27] International Prize for Arabic Fiction, 'About the Prize,' https://www.arabicfiction.org/en/about-the-prize, accessed December 13, 2021.

from the IPAF shortlists that have been translated into English and are set in contemporary Saudi Arabia.[28] Third, diversity: I have tried to choose novels that are diverse. In this way, I hope that the novels – both their authors, male and female, and the characters from different social classes – express a plurality that conforms to reality.

I am aware that reading the books in translation may affect my interpretation. After all, translation itself is an encounter with literature, a mode of reading.[29] I have nevertheless chosen to view these translated novels as literary works in their own right. In addition, I also do not intend to claim that these novels are representative of the whole, complex Saudi society. However, the novels clearly belong to a new literary phase in which there was, for the first time, global recognition for the Saudi novel. These IPAF novels move in an international field, as international as the oil industry is. According to Anne-Marie McManus, prizes bring together everyone involved with literature, such as writers, publishers, and critics: 'they make overt the imbrication of literature in economies of exchange and reproduction.'[30] The IPAF confers legitimacy on expressions of a genre: the Arabic novel, heuristically defined by its language of production. It is imagined to be Arab-owned but internationally facilitated.[31] Translated IPAF novels now circulate within the global economy and in the global canon.[32] According to McManus, the prize's mix of marketing and culture (for instance, the Tourism and Culture Authority of Abu Dhabi funds the IPAF) capitalizes on literature and its creators as 'paradigmatic models for neoliberal development'.[33] The connection to internationalization and economy is the reason I focused on this prize to choose from for my Saudi corpus.

There are several publications on the novels of my choice: on the reception of the novels by Abdo Khal and Raja Alem, examining the allegedly scandalous content and the fact that the novels were banned in Saudi Arabia, and studies on the novels' link with postmodernism.[34] *The Dove's Necklace* has the widest range of publications: from feminist readings to studies on semiotics and other linguistic topics.[35] The English edition of *The Critical Case of a Man Called K* only appeared last year. There are no English academic publications yet and only one in Arabic.[36] Most importantly, to the best of my knowledge, nothing has been published about these three novels in relation to oil yet.

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[28] In 2017, the Riyadh-born novelist Mohammed Hasan Alwan won the IPAF for *A Small Death*, a fictionalized account of the life of the Sufi saint Ibn 'Arabi. The historical character of the novel makes it unsuitable for this research project.

[29] The question remains if these translated novels are a mirror of Saudi society or a response to the market demand of non-Arabic publishers and readers. One must continue to examine which novels are translated and get a non-Arabic readership and which are not.

[30] Anne-Marie McManus, 'Scale in the Balance, Reading with the International Prize for Arabic Fiction ("The Arabic Booker"),' *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46/1 (2016), 218.

[31] McManus, 'Scale in the Balance,' 220.

[32] There are also criticisms of the prize, such as that male writers are favored, and that experimental works are not submitted since publishers prefer socio-cultural novels for the sake of sales. See: Marcia Qualey, 'Eyes on the Prize,' February 12, 2014, http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/02/12/eyes-on-the-prize/, accessed May 9, 2022.

[33] McManus, 'Scale in the Balance,' 225.

[34] See: Noura Algahtani, *The Dynamics of Interpretive Communities and the Contemporary Saudi Novel: A Study in the Reception of Abdo Khal, Raja Alem, Rajaa Alsanea and Yousef al-Mohaimeed* (PhD Dissertation, University of Leeds, 2017); Mohammed Alshammari, *The Postmodern Novel in Saudi Arabia and America* (PhD Dissertation, University of Arkansas, 2017).

[35] See for instance: Najlaa Aldeeb, 'An Intersectional Feminist Reading of *The Dove's Necklace* and *Hend and the Soldier*,' in *Memory, Voice, and Identity*, eds. Feroza Jussawalla and Doaa Omran (London: Routledge, 2021); Raja Abuali and Behzad Qiqlo, 'Semiotics of tension in Rajā Alem's *Tavq al-Hamām* based on Jacques Fontanille and Claude Zilberberg's viewpoints,' *Rays of Criticism in Arabic and Persian* 11/41 (2021), 41-64.

[36] See: Asma Moqbel Awad Al-Ahmadi, 'Implicit Cultural Patterns in the Saudi Novel: Life of Mr. K & Critical Condition of Mr. K as Two Cases in Point,' *مجلة الدراسات العربية* 41/1 (2020), 1797-1838.

The relevance of this research lies in the fact that it examines the socio-economic impacts of oil wealth and the oil capitalist system narrative in Saudi novels. The premise is that literature, like other art forms, influences the perception of the reader. Of course, readers do not take everything for granted, but a narrative does influence how they think about a subject.[37] Individuals gain information from fictional works: 'Although the relative strength of attitudes changed by fiction and narrative remains an open question, it is clear that individuals regularly alter their real-world beliefs and attitudes in response to fictional communications.' [38] Especially readers that have the sensation of being 'lost' in a novel, of being so absorbed that they are seeing the action of the story unfolding before them, reflect less critically on the events and concepts they were reading about and can unconsciously adopt information and beliefs.[39] For these reasons, it is essential to analyze the images of oil wealth and urgent related themes such as (in)equality and (in)justice that emerge from the novels.

Although oil is not the novels' theme, they provide intriguing thoughts on economy, (foreign) politics and culture, which are directly related to petroleum. They reveal the obscured effects of the oil capitalist system, such as the unequal distribution of the advantages of petroleum. I explore how the case studies position themselves within the petrodiscourse. The thesis is based on the idea that oil wealth has beneficial aspects as well as cost factors.[40] As early as 1982, Jahangir Amuzegar described the 'very mixed blessing' of oil wealth.[41] The hypothesis is that the novels reflect on the alleged positive effects of oil wealth and show the cost of 'development' and the disruptive reorganization of social relations that resulted. By carefully analyzing the novels through a petrointersectional lens, which I discuss in detail in chapter one, the impacts of oil wealth can be demonstrated in three different areas: space, work, and the body. The thesis is a humanities-based study of oil, viewing oil as a multi-faceted entity central to Saudi modernity. It aims to extend the horizon of cultural scholarship on oil, with a specific focus on the different representations found in literature.

The thesis consists of two parts. Thinkers such as Stephen Greenblatt argue that texts are always intricately connected to their historical and social contexts. So, the first chapter is an exploration of Saudi socio-economic context, forming the basis for the reading method in chapter two. First, it briefly discusses the history of the oil industry and the literary field. It elaborates on the debate on petroculture and will explain the intersectional lens used. Without going into detail about all the current debates, the effects of oil wealth

[37] Jeffrey Strange and Cynthia Leung, 'How Anecdotal Accounts in News and in Fiction can Influence Judgments of a Social Problem's Urgency, Causes and Cures,' *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 25/4 (1999), 436-449.
[38] Melanie Green, Jennifer Garst, and Timothy Brock, 'The Power of Fiction: Determinants and Boundaries,' in *The Psychology of Entertainment Media: Blurring the Lines Between Entertainment and Persuasion*, ed. L.J. Shrum (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 173.
[39] Green, 'The Power of Fiction,' 168. This phenomenon is called transportation, an engaged form of fictional processing. A more recent publication on this, also citing Green's 2004 chapter, is Melanie Green and Helena Bilandzic, 'Narrative Effects,' in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, eds. Mary Oliver, Arthur Raney, and Jennings Bryant (New York: Routledge, 2019).
[40] Jahangir Amuzegar, 'Oil Wealth: A Very Mixed blessing,' *Foreign Affairs* 60/4 (1982), 819.
[41] Amuzegar, 'Oil Wealth,' 819.

in petrostates and especially Saudi Arabia in the above-mentioned areas – space, work, and the body – are explored.

The second chapter focuses on literature analysis. With a comparative thematic close reading, I arrive at an interpretation of the literary works. Close reading is a text-oriented, ergocentric approach to literature.[42] It is a holistic method which focuses on specific details of a text to discern deeper meanings.[43] It can focus on subject, form, diction, and theme. In this thesis, I focus on theme. In that respect my method shares elements of critical thematic analysis, an independent qualitative descriptive approach for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data.[44] I identified the themes inductively: I wanted to see what would emerge from the text itself, instead of starting with a theme and forcing it on the text. I started with a thorough reading of the novels twice, initially for general understanding, then to pay close attention to detect patterns and themes. It appeared that the same themes were addressed in all three novels, urbanization, class, migration, gender, and health: themes very compatible with my research question. I then read the novels again, highlighting notable quotes concerning the themes. The next stage was to organize the quotes, clustering them together in groups. I categorized them into three overarching themes: space, work, and the body. The final stage was the comparative analysis based on the themes: their function, context, and meanings. In this way I arrived at an interpretation of how oil wealth is represented.

A new, dominant narrative about oil not considered is apocalyptic environmentalism and ecocriticism. However, even though the novels, and thus this research, are not concerned with climate change or the transition to new energy sources, they can certainly play a role in better understanding how oil has taken root in Saudi's daily consciousness and what far-reaching consequences this has. Although oil shapes 'our' lives, 'we' have been almost completely blind to its impact on 'us'. In line with petrocritics Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, and Imre Szema, I argue that oil should be included in the narratives of cultural change and transitions.[45] This thesis is a beginning to that.

[42] David Greenham, *Close Reading: The Basics* (London/New York: Routledge, 2019), 4.
[43] Greenham, *Close Reading*, 6. Close reading can be used for different purposes. The New Critics, an influential Anglo-Saxon school of literary criticism, used it to highlight the unity of a work, while the poststructuralists endorsed a deconstructive close reading to reveal the fissures and disunities within a work. Close reading is more a reading process than a method with a set outcome.
[44] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clark, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,' *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3/2 (2006), 79. For the analysis of the themes, codes have to be classified first. In that respect, thematic analysis differs from my method.
[45] Wilson, et al., *Petrocultures*, 5.

Chapter 1: Petro, Petro, and Even More Petro

This chapter first presents the historical framework explaining the development of oil in Saudi Arabia, showing how the sudden oil wealth led to enormous change. It then examines the development of the novel genre in Saudi Arabia. It highlights literary developments, which often parallel economic developments. After the brief historical overview, oil's influence on culture and literature is examined. From this arises the debate on petrofiction. The concept of petrofiction will be discussed in order to arrive at the lens used for the analysis: petrointersectionality. Next, the chapter highlights the theoretical debate on whether oil or something else has influenced the changes many oil-rich countries have faced. It ends with a theoretical examination of the impact of oil on the three areas of space, work, and the body. It provides insight into the contemporary situation regarding urban planning, work contracts, migration, health care, and gender equality, serving as the foundation for chapter two.

1.1 A Brief History of Oil in Saudi Arabia

The story of oil dates back to 1933, when King Abdul Aziz Al-Saud granted an American oil production company the right to explore for oil in the new Kingdom. In 1938 large quantities of oil were discovered in Dammam Dome, the eastern part of Saudi Arabia. A year later, the American oil company formed a consortium called the Arabian-American Oil Company (ARAMCO) and the first oil cargo departed from the new oil terminal at Dammam.[46] By the 1970s, Saudi Arabia had become the world's largest producer and exporter of oil. In 1980, the government acquired full ownership of Aramco and renamed it Saudi Aramco. The company began to explore areas that had previously remained untouched, discovering vast reserves of high-quality crude oil to this day.

Oil wealth became how Saudi Arabia could modernize without developing, that is, without radical social changes. The steady oil exports in the 1970s allowed the government to concentrate on massive long-term projects. The so-called five-year plans were centered on different projects: first establishing telecommunication services and transport, second improving education and health services, and diversifying economic resources, and third establishing industrial sites and cities.[47] The sudden oil wealth provided the funds to build a basic infrastructure of roads, airports, schools, and hospitals. The lifestyle of Saudi citizens in both cities and villages changed drastically in a short period.[48] The Bedouin existence – dependent on fishing, trading, and livestock – transformed to a life with increased mobility, access to specialist medical care, living and working in massive new construction projects in the cities, and subsidies for technological agriculture. For instance, the Saudi Agricultural Bank provided interest-free loans for agricultural projects for Bedouins.[49]

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[46] Fred Lawson, 'Modern Saudi Arabia,' in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*, may 24, 2017, https://oxfordre.com/asianhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277727-e-270, accessed May 9, 2022.
[47] Ibrahem Almarhaby, *A Thematic Investigation of Saudi Women's Fiction, 1958-2016* (PhD Dissertation, University of Manchester, 2019) 24-25.
[48] Almarhaby, *A Thematic Investigation of Saudi Women's Fiction*, 28.
[49] John Presley, *A Guide to Saudi Arabian Economy* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 112.

Oil countries often use oil revenues to achieve three goals: to 1) raise the living standards of the current generation; 2) follow a domestic development strategy that will ensure the welfare of future generations; and 3) reduce dependence on oil.[50] Regarding the third goal, Saudi Arabia indeed has increasingly diversified its economy; it now produces and exports various industrial goods. In 2016, the development program Saudi Vision 2030 was launched, 'a unique transformative economic and social reform blueprint that is opening Saudi Arabia up to the world'.[51] The program's priority is to develop alternative sources of income in order for the government to become less dependent on oil. However, despite this program, the economic base continues to be dominated by oil. In 2020, petroleum exports still accounted for nearly 70% of the country's total exports in terms of value.[52]

Petroleum production and consumption are also vital to international relations and have often been decisive in determining foreign policy. For example, the 1973 War between the Arab governments and the Israeli State resulted in two major oil shocks and a boycott of oil sales to Israel. The following increases in the oil prices shifted the international political relations and introduced a new concept: petro-Islam.[53] In the context of Saudi Arabia, the term often refers to the international propagation of the specific Saudi interpretation of Sunni Islam derived from the doctrine of al-Wahhab.[54] Petro-Islam starts from the premise that it is not an accident of geology or history that oil is concentrated in the Arab countries. Saudi Arabia is convinced that its oil wealth is connected to religion, a blessing by God.[55] Not only does Saudi Arabia have access to oil, but two of the most important sites for Islam, Mecca and Medina, are in the Kingdom, which is why thousands of religious tourists are welcomed yearly. Saudi Arabia has embraced the *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca, as a symbol of the Kingdom's commitment to the Islamic world.[56] The combination of petroleum and the pilgrimage ensures that Saudi Arabia has a strong influence on the world stage.

1.2 The Novel in Saudi Arabia

Economic and literary developments go hand in hand. In his dissertation, Ibrahem Almarhaby explains: 'Because of the oil wealth, education, journalism, the press and printing became key literary and cultural influences, which promoted the emergence and development of Saudi literature.'[57] Moneera al-Ghadeer explains that novels were not considered a form of entertainment. Until recently, poetry was the dominant genre.[58] Only six novels were published in the first period (1930-1959). Those early novels had weak 'artistic

[50] Amuzegar, 'Oil Wealth,' 817.
[51] Vision 2030, 'Vision 2030 Overview,' https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/v2030/overview/, accessed May 8, 2022.
[52] International Monetary Fund, *Saudi Arabia 2021 Country Report*, July 8, 2021, https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2021/07/07/Saudi-Arabia-2021-Article-IV-Consultation-Press-Release-and-Staff-Report-461736, accessed May 8, 2022, 41, 44; Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, 'Saudi Arabia,' https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/about_us/169.htm, accessed May 8, 2022.
[53] Hamzeh Safavi and Mahdi Ghaderi, 'The Impact of Petro Islam on Saudi Arabia's Regional Policies in the Horizon of 2035,' *Fundamental and Applied Studies of the Islamic World* 1/2 (2020), 44.
[54] Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 73.
[55] Nazih Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 232.
[56] Sandra Mackey, *The Saudis: Inside the Desert Kingdom* (New York: WW. Norton, 2002), 327. Mackey also explains that petrodollars are used on facilities for the *hajj*, namely leveling hill peaks to make room for tents, providing electricity for tents and cooling pilgrims with air conditioning. See: Mackey, *The Saudis*, 327.
[57] Almarhaby, *A Thematic Investigation of Saudi Women's Fiction,* 50.
[58] Moneera al-Ghadeer, 'Saudi Arabia,' 397.

structure, conventional topics and dull narrative presentation'.[59] New modes of innovation began to be displayed in a few novels published between 1959-1970. During this period, writers explored topics relevant to social change in the leap from the pre-oil era to the oil-boom society of the 1970s.[60] One of the most influential novelists is Abdelrahman Munif. Influenced by him, modernist authors made aesthetic advances that allowed the novel to reach its zenith in the 1990s.[61] Not only did the aesthetic characteristics change over time, so did the number of novels published: from 208 novels in the period 1930-1999 to 578 novels between 2000-2011.[62] For Mohammed Alshammari, the new phase in the development of the Saudi novel began in 2001.[63] During this period, the country first received much worldwide attention for its literature. It obtained membership to two powerful organizations dominating the global economy: the Group of Twenty and the World Trade Organization. According to Alshammari, these memberships indicate that 'Saudi Arabia is clearly one of [the] key participants in the operations of late capitalism.'[64] With that, Saudi Arabia entering the circle of powerful nations, the global expansion of Saudi novels was also facilitated.

What strikes Al-Ghadeer is that many contemporary novels incorporate a satirical approach and that 'the new novels often feature cruelty, disgust, racial discrimination, sodomy, rape, and homosexuality, none of which is found in modernist texts.'[65] The new novelists depict violence as the consequence of repressive political power: 'The negative sublime, demonstrated in tropes of sadism and perversion, enables a critique of despotic political domination.'[66] The three novels that will be analyzed fit into this most recent phase of the novel. Not only does the publication date indicate this, thematically too, they are consistent with Al-Ghadeer's description. Satire and excessive violence play a significant role in both Alem and Khal's novels. *The Critical Case of a Man Called K* is less violent and cruel but exceptionally satirical.

According to Al-Ghadeer, contemporary novels expose moral decline and highlight what has long been perceived as abnormal in Saudi society. About the context of the contemporary novel, she states: 'The context from which this fiction is drawn is a unique historical moment in which conflict, trade, migration, foreign labor, and digital media technology have intersected to impact local cultures; borderlines are pushed or subverted, generating transregional exchange.'[67] According to her, the developments in contemporary writing cannot be separated from 'the new changes in architecture, education, telecommunication, and the visual arts, or from the new market flows.'[68]

If oil is the foundation of the Saudi economy and oil wealth has fundamentally changed society and therefore affected literature, how come so few novels have been published that engage with the oil

[59] Moneera al-Ghadeer, 'Saudi Arabia,' 397.
[60] Idem, 398.
[61] Idem, 400.
[62] Idem, 403.
[63] Alshammari, *The Postmodern Novel in Saudi Arabia and America*, 11.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Moneera al-Ghadeer, 'Saudi Arabia,' 403.
[66] Idem, 404.
[67] Idem, 402.
[68] Ibid.

industry? The first ground-breaking essay on the link between oil and cultural history was by Amitav Ghosh in the 1990s, which turned out to be the beginning of a debate that continues today.

1.3 From Petrofiction to Petrointersectionality

In his extended book review of Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* (1984) – a Saudi novel about the discovery of and subsequent drilling for oil in a Persian Gulf community in the 1930s –, Amitav Ghosh coined the term 'petrofiction'. Ghosh uses 'petrofiction' to classify literature about the oil industry and likens it to literature about the spice trade. He argues that much literature has been produced on the spice trade, unlike the oil industry, which has produced only one work worth mentioning, namely *Cities of Salt*.[69] Ghosh speaks of a 'literary barrenness' and speculates that the reason behind the lack of petrofiction is the history of oil, which is embarrassing for all parties involved. Ghosh states: 'very few people anywhere write about the Oil Encounter. The silence extends much further than the Arabic- or English-speaking worlds.'[70]

Many authors after Ghosh, such as Imre Szeman and Graeme Macdonald, have elaborated on this.[71] They were not satisfied with Ghosh's use of the concept of petrofiction. In 2012, Szeman argued that the term ought to be construed far more capaciously as a new periodizing gesture.[72] Nowadays, the concept of petrofiction is extended to mean all fiction written during petromodernity. Petrocritics started to examine works of fiction for the profoundly uneven distribution of oil's benefits and consequences to peoples and territories around the globe.[73] Hannes Bergthaller joins this definition of petrocriticism by stating that the socio-historical context of the petronovel is more important than explicit subject matter.[74]

Michael Rubenstein describes how in the two decades between Ghosh's thematic and Szeman's broader definition, the oil era became retrospectively more visible with the rise to prominence of environmentalist discourses.[75] But, and here Ghosh still has a valid point, oil often remains invisible in cultural productions and the canon of works discussed in the context of petrocultures remains small.[76] This might have to do with the experience of energy in general. Heidi Scott explains the paradox of this experience. Fuel itself is not invisible: after all, the landscape of a developed city is filled with highways, gas stations, and power lines. However, people never have to exert physical, mental, and social effort to gather energy anymore.[77] The idea of energy has been growing increasingly abstract and the experience of oil has become largely immaterial. Scott explains it as follows: 'We live in a strange era in which fossil fuels signify both abundance

[69] Amitav Ghosh, 'Petrofiction,' *The New Republic* 2/1 (1992), 31. There is a short list of thematic petronovels included on the website Petrofictionary: https://petrofictionary.wordpress.com/petrofictions/. The other well-known example in the Arabic language area besides Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* is Nawal El Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* (1993).
[70] Ghosh, 'Petrofiction,' 30.
[71] See for a descriptive and historical overview of the oil and culture debate: Christa Grewe-Volpp, 'Petrocultures,' *Ecozon@* 11/2 (2020), 273-277.
[72] Imre Szeman, 'Introduction to Focus: Petrofictions,' *American Book Review* 33/3 (2012), 3.
[73] Michael Rubenstein, 'Petro-,' In *Futures of Comparative Literature: ACLA State of the Discipline Report*, ed. Ursula Heise (London: Routledge, 2017), 645
[74] Hannes Bergthaller, 'Cli-Fi and Petrofiction: Question Genre in the Anthropocene,' *America Studies* 62/1 (2017), 120.
[75] Rubenstein, 'Petro-,' 645.
[76] Roman Bartosch, 'The Energy of Stories: Postcolonialism, the Petroleum Unconscious, and the Crude Side of Cultural Ecology,' *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* 6/2 (2019), 118.
[77] Scott, *Fuel*, 5.

and the threat of scarcity, enjoyment and fear, exuberance and melancholy: this is our fuel ontology.'[78] This is in line with one of the first book-length studies about oil and culture by Stephanie LeMenager. LeMenager examines how people experience themselves as modern 'living within oil, breathing it and registering it'.[79] The experience is one of mixed emotions: happy about the benefits of modern life, but also seeing the dark underside of oil.[80]

In 2011, Patricia Yaeger coined the term 'energy unconscious'. By this term, she denotes the power of energy forms, which permeate the social life and culture of human beings, in ways that go unnoticed.[81] Yaeger urgently called for this energy unconsciousness to be explored. And that seems to have been heeded. Today 'petro-' can serve as a prefix for any noun. There are recent publications on petropolitics, petrosexuality, petroviolence, petrodiscourse, petroimperialism, petromasculinity, petronationalism, petromyopia, petromagic, petrofeminism, petrodiaspora, petrosphere, petromelancholia, and petrostates.[82] Name it, it is there. One term is particularly important to this thesis because it can be used as an umbrella term: petrointersectionality. Arising from Rubenstein's petrocriticism, Sheena Wilson has called for a lens of 'critical petrointersectionality'. Through this lens, it can be exposed how the inequalities of race, class, and gender in the current petroculture are not only perpetuated, 'but also actively deployed as rhetorical strategies to literally and figuratively buoy and sustain existing power sources: oil and the neoliberal petro-state.'[83] Wilson emphasizes that it is not oil that places society and its needs in binary opposition to marginalized groups: 'It is not oil that co-opts middle- and upper-class consumers through falsely progressive discourses that sell the promise of alternatives. Oil merely fuels those interests.'[84] It seems like the heavy users of energy have set the terms for how everyone is supposed to live in relation to oil. Therein lies the crux of this study: from the lens of petrointersectionality novels whose thematic content is not oil can be examined. Reading petrodiscourses through a petrointersectionalist lens raises fundamental questions on class, gender, religion, race, and ethnicity. In the analysis from chapter two these concepts are not always mentioned verbatim, also there will be less emphasis on religion and ethnicity. Nevertheless, the analysis demonstrates how these concepts are inextricably linked, and that one cannot understand questions of class, without questioning concepts such as gender, disability, and health.

[78] Scott, *Fuel*, 6.
[79] Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum in the American Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6.
[80] LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 6.
[81] Patricia Yaeger, 'Editor's Column: Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Sources,' *PMLA* 126/2 (2011), 306.
[82] A selection of some recent petrostudies: Jennifer Wenzel, 'Petro-magic-realism: toward a political ecology of Nigerian literature,' *Postcolonial Studies* 9/4 (2006), 449-464; Heather Turcotte, 'Contextualizing petro-sexual politics,' *Alternatives* 36/3 (2011), 200-220; Stephanie LeMenager, 'Petro-melancholia: The BP blowout and the arts of grief' *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 19/2 (2011), 25-55; Helen Kapstein, 'Petrofeminism: Love and Pleasure in the Age of Oil,' *2020 MLA Annual Convention*, MLA, 2020.
[83] Sheena Wilson, 'Gender,' in *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment*, eds. Imre Szeman and Patricia Yaeger (New York: Fordham UP, 2017), 177.
[84] Wilson, 'Gender,' 177.

1.4 Is it Oil or Something Else?

Many publications analyze how oil changes structures of economies, which regulate social outcomes, such as changes in values among individuals. However, are these changes caused by the influence of oil, or perhaps by religion, geography, history, or something else? There is a lively academic debate on the actual impact of oil. For instance, in 2008, Michael Ross pointed to oil wealth as a potential explanation for the slow progress toward gender equality in the Middle East.[85] In 2012, Matthew Groh and Casey Rothschild argued just the opposite: they consider a more important role for Islam in explaining the lagging female labor force participation rates in Ross' data.[86]

The second academic debate is about the paradox of plenty, whether oil wealth has put the recipients on the (economic as well as political) path to sustainable growth, prosperity, and progress or not. Are oil-rich countries less democratic and more corrupt? The question regarding conflict and violence knows two arguments. First, the presence of oil creates motives for conflict, and thus, there is an increase in civil wars (the 'resource curse' hypothesis).[87] Second, with the income of oil, regimes can buy off peace through patronage, large-scale distributive policies, and effective repression (the theory of the rentier state).[88] There is also the question of what exactly are positive and what are negative effects. Excessive violence and (civil) wars are generally considered to be negative, but is a patriarchal society also viewed that way by everyone? Or the disappearance of traditional jobs?

The questions around oil, practices of modernization, globalization, religion, violence, democracy, and gender should be examined in isolation. However, in this thesis, I examine the novels from an oil lens, exploring the impact of Saudi Arabia's vastly increased wealth since the 1970s, which the beginning of this chapter has shown was at least partly caused by the oil industry. Chapter two explores how the novels perceive oil wealth, what effects are described, and whether they are approached negatively or positively. This is independent of the question of whether religion or other matters have (had) an equal or greater influence than oil. Nevertheless, it is essential to be aware of these debates.

1.5 Space, Work, and the Body

From politics to education and law: oil affects many different aspects of society. Unfortunately, it is impossible to study all of them. Three categories emerged most frequently during the reading, so those are the focus of chapter one: space, work, and the body. They represent both physical and abstract aspects of oil. For the category 'space' I focus on reflections on urban planning and architecture: the physical

[85] Michael Ross, 'Oil, Islam, and Women,' *American Political Science Review* 102/1 (2008), 107-123.
[86] Matthew Groh and Casey Rothschild. 'Oil, Islam, Women, and Geography: A Comment on Ross (2008),' *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 7/1 (2012), 70.
[87] One of the first book-length publications on this hypothesis is by Rob Nixon. He states that the more a nation-state is blessed with the plenitude of an energy resource, the greater the chances are that the state would get concomitantly spoilt. These states are more often than not undemocratic, warmongering, riddled with corruption and governed by despots. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 68-70.
[88] Daniel Albertsen and Indra de Soya, 'Oil, Islam, and the Middle East: An Empirical Analysis of the Repression of Religion, 1980-2013,' *Politics and Religion* 11/1 (2018), 249-280; Matthias Basedau and Jann Lay, 'Resource Curse or Rentier Peace? The Ambiguous Effects of Oil Wealth and Oil Dependence on Violent Conflict,' *Journal of Peace Research* 46/6 (2009), 757-776.

appearance of buildings and places. The category 'work' is linked to questions of class. What kind of work do the characters do and how do they see the work of others? The last category, 'the body', is the broadest: here, I observe the female as well as the disabled or sick body. Also discussed is the role of excessive (sexual) violence. To understand these categories better, it is crucial to consider the contemporary Saudi context concerning these themes.

Connecting Oil With its Territory: The Importance of Space

The construction industry's contribution to the growth of the Saudi economy has been unprecedented over the past three decades as a result of an increase in revenue from oil.[89] Carola Hein argues that corporate and public actors have built the 'physical and financial flows of petroleum into the very landscape'.[90] Hein identifies different layers of those flows that combine into a global petroleumscape. The concept of the global petroleumscape Hein coins is an analytical tool that engages the roles different oil actors play in developing new urban ideas and built forms.[91] The extraction, refining, processing, and consumption of petroleum have had a significant impact on seas, landscapes, cities, and buildings. Hein describes the visible changes in the environment: refineries, pipelines, and the road and rail infrastructure. This is the physical flow present in industrialized areas and in daily life.[92] The financial flow of oil is reflected in headquarters, research facilities, housing, and cinemas, among other things. All stand as 'material witnesses' to the 'invasiveness' of petroleum.[93]

Hein explains that oil companies are not necessarily the planning agents but often work with the public government in charge of spatial planning. As a result, 'the flows and the interests related to petroleum and their representation have influenced public planning practice, directly and indirectly, in response to the changing urban environment.' [94] Hein connects the actual places where oil has been held with the representation of these spaces and the practices of petroleum products. Her reading of global petroleumspace aligns with Henri Lefebvre's understanding of space as socially produced and appropriated by the powerful as a tool.[95] In the analysis of the novels, space is employed similarly, not as a means of production but also as a means of control and power.

Nelida Fuccaro explains that in the Arab world, the history of oil urbanization is identified by 'the spectacular transformation of pre-oil towns into glitzy modern cities', starting in the 1950s.[96] Initially built to serve the infrastructure of oil extraction, oil towns later functioned as central places of industrial growth

[89] Dubem Ikediashi, Stephen Ogunlana, and Abdulaziz Alotaibi, 'Analysis of Project Failure Factors for Infrastructure Projects in Saudi Arabia: A Multivariate Approach,' *Journal of Construction in Developing Countries* 19/1 (2014), 35.
[90] Carola Hein, 'Oil Spaces: The Global Petroleumscape in the Rotterdam/The Hague Area,' *Journal of Urban History* 44/5 (2018), 887.
[91] Mohamad Sedighi and Bader Albader. 'Framing a New Discourse on Petromodernity: The Global Petroleumscape and Petroleum Modernism,' *Planning Perspectives* 34/2 (2019), 346.
[92] Hein, 'Oil Spaces,' 899.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Hein, 'Oil Spaces,' 888.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Nelida Fuccaro, 'Arab Oil Towns as Petro-Histories,' in *Oil Spaces*: *Exploring the Global Petroleumspace*, ed. Carola Hein (New York: Routledge, 2022), 130.

and oil-related employment.[97] In sparsely populated countries such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar, the oil towns set the pace of urbanization and urban modernization, and their expansion measured the demographic growth of the oil industry.[98] According to Fuccaro, these towns 'supported the new and intersecting regimes of technology, expertise, work, and life created by the petroleum industry.'[99]

Mecca is a Saudi centuries-old city that has also changed tremendously over the years. Mecca, where *The Dove's Necklace* is set, is the spiritual heart of Islam: every Muslim prays in the direction (*qibla*) of Mecca, and the *hajj*, the spiritual journey a Muslim should make once in their life, leads there. Due to the development of the aviation industry in the twentieth century, the number of pilgrims increased massively, necessitating expansion.[100] Since then, much has changed: the settlements in the mountains around the Great Mosque have been demolished (the expansion and modernization of the mosque have always come at the expense of the size of the mountains); Mecca has been verticalized (high-rise buildings have been built around the mosque to accommodate the pilgrims); expansion projects often ignored the traditional local Arab-Islamic architecture, resulting in a significant difference between individuals' buildings made of mud and stone and the pilgrims' hotels made of glass, cement, marble and metal.[101] Overall, Aliyu Barau concludes: 'The expansion of the Grand Mosque is responsible for destruction of Mecca's cultural and natural landscapes and their associated social, spiritual and ecological benefits.'[102]

The Labor Market, Unemployment, and Foreign Workers

The impact of oil on the work domain is tremendous. Michael Ross explains how oil wealth caused traditional forms of female employment in small export trades and local agriculture to disappear, turning instead to 'male' sectors such as construction.[103] Many petrocritics focus on the wealth of a few elites, which continues to grow and is built on a foundation of short-term, part-time contracts with masses of overworked debtors.[104] Jahangir Amuzegar associates oil prosperity with misguided economic policies, megalomania, bureaucratic bungling, waste, and inefficiency.[105] Specifically, about Saudi Arabia, Amuzegar states there is a skewed income distribution between Saudi citizens and guest workers, a breakneck pace of real estate speculation, concerns about a permanent population of guest workers, and clashes between concepts of modernization.[106] The new 'oil psychology' in Saudi Arabia is termed petromania, or quick-

[97] Fuccaro, 'Arab Oil Towns as Petro-Histories,' 130.
[98] Idem, 137. Fuccaro explains that Dhahran, one of the most important oil towns in Saudi Arabia, was built by the then American company Aramco. It is important to consider cities like Dhahran as spatial, political, social, and discursive formations of foreign capitalism and imperialism and its interaction with national modernities. This provides insight into the complex oil relations between industrial/imperialist enterprise on the one hand, and as material and ideological building blocks of modern societies on the other.
[99] Idem, 131.
[100] Aliyu Barau, 'The Changed City of Mecca: Understanding its Transition to Deep Globalisation,' (Paper presented at the Seventh Gulf Research Meeting, Cambridge, 16-19 August 2016), 156.
[101] Barau, 'The Changed City of Mecca, 156-157. The Grand Mosque of Mecca is the largest mosque in the world. It surrounds the *Ka'aba*, a black and golden calligraphy studded square house standing as Muslims' central spiritual point.
[102] Idem, 157.
[103] Ross, 'Oil, Islam, and Women,' 107.
[104] See for instance: Wilson, et al., *Petrocultures*, 11.
[105] Amuzegar, 'Oil Wealth,' 820.
[106] Idem, 821.

money fever. According to Amuzegar, petromania has triggered 'an interminable struggle between privileged "Westernize" progressive elites and cultural traditionalists.'[107]

Saudi Arabia is indeed a major destination for workers from around the world. The Kingdom holds the largest population (at least 12 million) of migrant workers in the Middle East region, mainly expatriates from South Asia.[108] In 2013, expatriates made up 32 percent of the Saudi population, 56.5 percent of the workforce and as much as 89 percent of the private sector workforce.[109] Besides the high demand for (temporary) workers, for instance, for the duration of mega-infrastructure projects, Hammad Alhamad also mentions a cultural reason for the high number of migrant workers. Many Saudis find it shameful to work in cleaning, plumbing, construction, or gardening.[110] Francoise De Bel-Air's research reveals the size of the phenomenon of illegal migration: in April 2013, 4.7 million foreign workers were allowed to regularize their status. In the same year alone, 1 million illegal immigrants were supposed to leave the Kingdom, of whom, at the end of 2013, 547.000 were deported.[111] The conditions of the 'hidden community' of undocumented migrants are very poor; there are many legal, economic, and social dangers, as they do not have social protection.[112]

One reason for migrants to remain undocumented could have to do with the *kafala* system. This legal framework, the *kafala* or sponsorship system, gives individuals and companies in Saudi Arabia almost complete control over the employment and immigration status of migrant workers. In recent years, academic and journalistic investigations have exposed exploitation and abuse, primarily based on race and gender. For example, the Council on Foreign Relations speaks of restricted movement and communications because employers confiscate passports, visas, and phones.[113] Many foreign workers cannot decide for themselves when they want to communicate with or visit their home country.[114] The *kalafa* system would encourage modern slavery.[115] Also female domestic workers have drawn attention from a human rights point of view. Saudi Arabia has attracted many female workers since the oil boom, resulting in the

[107] Amuzegar, 'Oil Wealth,' 832.
[108] Fahad Alsharif, 'Undocumented Migrants in Saudi Arabia: COVID-19 and Amnesty Reforms,' *International Migration* 60/1 (2021), 190.
[109] Françoise De Bel-Air, 'Demography, Migration and Labour Market in Saudi Arabia,' Explanatory Note No. 1, 2014, Gulf Labour Market and Migration Programme, http://hdl.handle.net/1814/32151, 3, 5.
[110] Hammad Alhamad, 'The Labor Market in Saudi Arabia: Foreign Workers, Unemployment, and Minimum Wage,' *Inquiries Journal* 6/6 (2014), http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=905, 1.
[111] De Bel-Air, 'Demography, Migration and Labour Market in Saudi Arabia,' 10.
[112] Alsharif, 'Undocumented Migrants,' 190-201.
[113] Kali Robinson, 'What is the Kafala System?' Council on Foreign Relations, March 23, 2021, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-kafala-system#chapter-title-0-5, accessed June 14, 2022.
[114] In 2021, Saudi Arabia announced reforms to the *kafala* system, allowing migrant workers to change jobs and leave the country with the employer's permission. See: Aljazeera, 'Saudi Arabia announces changes to Kafala system,' March 14, 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/14/saudi-arabias-long-awaited-kafala-reform-goes-into-effect, accessed June 14, 2022. However, Human Rights Watch states that the reforms are insufficient: Human Right Watch, 'Saudi Arabia: Labor Reforms Insufficient,' March 25, 2021, https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/25/saudi-arabia-labor-reforms-insufficient, accessed June 14, 2022.
[115] Thalif Deen, 'Modern Day Slavery Rated World's Largest Single Crime Industry,' Inter Press Service News Agency, February 25, 2019, http://www.ipsnews.net/2019/02/modern-day-slavery-rated-worlds-largest-single-crime-industry/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=modern-day-slavery-rated-worlds-largest-single-crime-industry, accessed June 14, 2022.

feminization of migration.[116] Their conditions are often poor too because of maltreatment, abuse, and violence towards them.[117]

Declining oil revenues since 1985 combined with strong population growth have drastically limited the state's redistributive capabilities. Despite measures and adjustment policies to strengthen labor market stability after Saudi Arabia joined the World Trade Organization in 2005, youth unemployment and poverty became increasingly visible in the early 2000s.[118] There is high unemployment mainly among young people and women.[119] In 2013, the unemployment rate for the native population was 12.2 percent (7.6 percent for men compared to 33.4 percent for women) and 28.4 percent for the 15-29 age group (men: 17.5 percent and women: 60.3 percent).[120]

Healthcare and the Legal Status of Women

The exact impact of oil wealth on the physical body is challenging. In this thesis, the concept of the body is interpreted similarly to the concept of space: the body as something over which someone (or something) has control and power. Concepts of the body are often abstract theories, held outside of time, space, culture, and gender. However, Rob Imrie states that this 'presumption of a disembodied self' is impossible.[121] What generally has been presented through the context of architecture and art is a body 'infused with (male) gender, class, and the embodiment of health and normality.'[122] This paragraph demonstrates that everyday experiences of women and disabled and ill people are affected by the petrocapitalist narrative.

As with the oil money flows around the construction industry, the same can be said about healthcare. According to 2010 data, the Saudi healthcare system is 90 percent funded by oil.[123] As mentioned earlier, the healthcare system was one of the sectors that was drastically reformed during the five-year plans of the twentieth century. This is reflected in the budget the Ministry of Health spends on healthcare: the budgetary allotment has risen steadily from 2.8 percent of the national budget in 1970 to 18 percent in 2018.[124] The greater focus on health and welfare seems to be shown in the statistics. For example, the average life expectancy was 66 years in 1983 and 75,49 in 2017, the year *The Critical Case Called K* was published.[125] However, due to the ever-growing population, the supply of healthcare facilities is struggling

[116] Namie Tsujigami, 'Gender and "Tradition": Power Negotiation between Employers and Domestic Workers in Saudi Arabia,' in *Asian Migrant Workers in the Arab Gulf States*, eds. Masako Ishii, Naomi Hosoda, Masaki Matsuo and Koji Horinuki (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 83.
[117] Tsujigami, 'Gender and "Tradition",' 83.
[118] De Bel-Air, 'Demography, Migration and Labour Market in Saudi Arabia,' 4.
[119] In 2021, the number of Saudis working in the private sector reached 1.9 million: the highest number in history. This might be linked to the government's 'Saudization' policy to encourage employers to hire more Saudi workers to reduce the number of unemployed nationals.
[120] De Bel-Air, 'Demography, Migration and Labour Market in Saudi Arabia,' 4.
[121] Rob Imrie, 'The body, disability and Le Corbusier's conception of the Radiant environment,' in *Mind and Body Spaces: Geographies of Disability, Illness and Impairment*, eds. R. Butler and H. Parr (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 25.
[122] Imrie, 'The body,' 25.
[123] Sharifah Ezat Wan Puteh, Azimatun Noor Aizuddin and Abdulaziz Al Salem, 'Feasibility of National Health Insurance for Saudi Healthcare Services: Qualitative Study,' *Information Sciences Letters* 11/2 (2022), 427.
[124] Puteh, et al., 'Feasibility of National Health Insurance,' 427.
[125] Rumaiya Sajjad and Mohammed Qureshi, 'An Assessment of the Healthcare Services in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: An Analysis of the Old, Current, and Future Systems,' *International Journal of Healthcare Management* (2018), http://www.tandfonline.com/action/showCitFormats?doi=10.1080/20479700.2018.1433459, 1. See also for an extensive historical overview of the healthcare services in Saudi Arabia.

to keep pace, resulting in, for example, long waiting lists for specific healthcare services.[126] Saudis have free healthcare and free public health insurance, regardless of their employment status. There is private health insurance for expatriates living in Saudi Arabia. In the private sector, the employer is by law committed to providing an insurance policy for its employees and their families.[127]

Regarding women's legal rights, in Saudi Arabia, a legal system requires all Saudi women to have a male legal guardian.[128] This guardian has the authority to make decisions on behalf of a woman; it can be compared to a guardian's influence over a minor child. Usually, the guardian is the woman's father until the husband is given this position. Legally, women do not need permission to work or study, although many employers and universities still require it. Technological advances have made it easier to give permission. Since 2010, travel permission can be given via text message, and there is a government-sponsored app for this purpose. However, this also has the drawback of making it easier for guardians to track and control women.[129] In Saudi Arabia, domestic violence is prevalent. Several studies have been conducted to estimate the prevalence of domestic violence. In the publications, the percentage of women who have experienced abuse ranged from 34 percent to 57.7 percent.[130] Despite the government increasing its campaign to reduce the rates of sexual and domestic violence, it remains a taboo topic. As for rape, it is regulated by Islamic law: it is defined as a *hadd* crime.[131] *Hadd* crimes carry fixed penalties derived from Islamic sources. The evidence for rape is two male witnesses or a confession before the court. This makes it very difficult to prove rape to Saudi's judiciary.[132] Also, the regulation and punishment of prostitution have historical origins related to the application of Islamic law.[133] Prostitution in any form is illegal. Despite this, Saudi Arabia serves as a destination for women trafficked from Nigeria, Ethiopia, Morocco, Yemen, Pakistan, Iraq, Afghanistan, and India for sexual exploitation.[134] In the last couple of years, Saudi society rapidly changed the social openness for women by allowing them to drive cars, be independent after eighteen, and have full custody of their children. This ensures that some risks and problems disappear, while at the same time, new ones come in for them.[135]

[126] Sajjad and Qureshi, 'An Assessment of the Health Care Services,' 3.
[127] Council of Health Insurance, 'Employer Duties under the Rules,' March 30, 2017, https://chi.gov.sa/en/Insureds/Pages/Duties.aspx, accessed June 14, 2022.
[128] Harry Philby, William Ochsenwald, and Joshua Teitelbaum, 'Saudi Arabia,' *Encyclopedia Britannica*, June 11, 2022, https://www.britannica.com/place/Saudi-Arabia, accessed June 14, 2022.
[129] Human Right Watch, 'Saudi Arabia's Absher App Controlling Women's Travel While Offering Government Services,' May 6, 2019, https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/05/06/saudi-arabias-absher-app-controlling-womens-travel-while-offering-government, accessed June 14, 2022; Human Right Watch, 'Saudi Arabia: Mobile App Keeps Women at Home,' May 6, 2019, https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/05/06/saudi-arabia-mobile-app-keeps-women-home, accessed June 14, 2022.
[130] R. Wali, A. Khalil, and R. Alattas, 'Prevalence and Risk Factors of Domestic Violence in Women Attending the National Guard Primary Health Care Centers in the Western Region, Saudi Arabia, 2018,' *BMC Public Health* 20/1 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-8156-4, 2.
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[132] Tønnessen, *Women's Activism in Saudi Arabia*, 1, 11.
[133] Cristian Giuseppe Zaharie, 'The Legal Regime of Prostitution on the Muslim Countries,' *Contemporary Legal Institutions* 6/1 (2014), 4.
[134] US Department of State, '2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Saudi Arabia,' https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/saudi-arabia/, accessed June 14, 2022.
[135] Wali, et al., 'Prevalence and Risk Factors,' 8.

1.6 Conclusion

Since the early years of oil, much has changed at a rapid pace in Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom obtained a position on the world stage and became an economic power. The combination of petroleum and pilgrimage has caused the country to rise far above its borders. Oil wealth not only had a global impact but also a national one: from the migration to the city to improved infrastructure and medical care. The oil boom helped Saudi Arabia to build relations with other nations around the world, which also gave Saudi novelists the opportunity to read literature from different parts of the world and be inspired by it. Undoubtedly, the oil boom has contributed to the revival of intellectual and social life in Saudi Arabia. However, oil prosperity also caused a clash between new technologies and traditional forms of labor, bureaucratic bungling, and quick-money fever. If oil impacts everyday life, it is striking that it is sparsely reflected in cultural productions. In response to that question, Amitav Ghosh wrote an essay that started the debate on oil and literature, ending with Sheena Wilson's petrointersectionality. Through this lens the impact of oil wealth can be examined. How do the characters of contemporary Saudi literature describe their environment, work, and bodies? This will be explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 2: Space, Work, and the Body in the Contemporary Saudi Novel

In this chapter, three Saudi novels nominated for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) are analyzed to determine how they reflect on the impacts of oil wealth. First, the authors will be introduced and a summary of the novels will be given. Second, the novels will be analyzed through a petrointersectional lens to expose issues around class and gender in today's Saudi petroculture. What is presented is the last phase of my research, a comparative analysis of the themes. In three subchapters, subdivided according to the categories of chapter one – space, work, and the body – I examine how the concept of oil wealth is presented in the novels. For the analysis, I used the same editions of the novels throughout the whole chapter.[136] Therefore, in this chapter only, I use in-text citation only referring to the novels' pages.

2.1 The Novels

Abdo Khal (Al-Majanah, 1962) studied political science and worked as a preacher, primary school teacher, and journalist. He is considered one of the leading novelists in Saudi Arabia and has published several short-story collections, plays and seven novels.[137] *Throwing Sparks* (2009) is his most recent work. It was first published in Arabic by Al-Jamal Publications in Beirut. In 2010, Khal received the IPAF for this novel.[138] *Throwing Sparks* tells the story of Tariq, who reflects on his decision as a young man to leave his neighborhood in Jeddah to work for 'the Master', a mysterious wealthy businessman. Tariq is appointed in the magnificent palace as the Master's new executioner. Through his eyes, the reader witnesses the hideous tasks, including celebratory rapes, he performs for his Master.

Raja Alem (Mekka, 1970) has written ten novels, numerous plays, short stories, and essays. She has won many awards, including the Arabic Women's Creative Prize in 2005. Her work has been published in more than seven languages. In 2011 she was the first woman to win the IPAF for *The Dove's Necklace* (2010).[139] The novel centers around what at first seems a traditional detective story: a naked body was found in the Meccan Lane of Many Heads and two women are missing, leading a detective to investigate. However, the novel is much more complicated. It is a journey through modern-day Mecca, full of myths, nightmares, and hallucinations. In a meandering plot, sometimes told from the perspective of the lane itself, the reader learns more about the inhabitants of the poor neighborhood.

The Critical Case of a Man Called K, hereafter abbreviated to *The Critical Case*, is the debut novel of Aziz Mohammed (Khobar, 1987). Mohammed had only published one short story under a pseudonym before the Lebanese publisher Dar al Tanweer published his debut in 2017. He was the youngest and the first debut author to be shortlisted for the IPAF.[140] The novel is about an unnamed young man who works for a large

[136] Raja Alem, *The Dove's Necklace*, trans. Katharine Halls and Adam Talib (London and New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2016); Abdo Khal, *Throwing Sparks*, trans. Maïa Tabet and Michael K. Scoot (Doha: Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing, 2014); Aziz Mohammed, *The Critical Case of a Man Called K*, trans. Humphrey Davies (New York and Cairo: Hoopoe, 2021).
[137] Al-Ghadeer, 'Saudi Arabia,' 406.
[138] International Prize for Arabic Fiction, 'Abdo Khal,' https://www.arabicfiction.org/en/Abdo-Khal, accessed June 27, 2022.
[139] International Prize for Arabic Fiction, 'Raja Alem,' https://www.arabicfiction.org/en/Raja-Alem, accessed June 27, 2022.
[140] International Prize for Arabic Fiction, 'Aziz Mohammed,' https://www.arabicfiction.org/en/AzizMohammed, accessed June 27, 2022.

corporation and dreams of becoming a writer. It takes the form of a 40-week journal, written first on his work computer, then at home, and later in the hospital after he is diagnosed with leukemia. Although it seems like his death is growing closer toward the final pages, the reader never finds out what happens after the 40th week.

Throwing Sparks spans forty years, from the 1970s, when the most prominent effects of the discovery of oil became visible, to the 2010s. *The Dove's Necklace* is set around 2005, with many flashbacks to the twentieth century. These novels are expected to pay attention to the immense development projects that sprang up to improve transportation, education, and healthcare, rapidly transforming the country. *The Critical Case* does not mention specific historical events or time signatures, but it is assumed to be set in the present. It will presumably focus on the current situation in Saudi Arabia.

2.2 Space: Everything New Makes Something Old Disappear

In this section the focus is on urban planning and architecture. The novels are set in the city. How do the characters describe their living environment? *Throwing Sparks* is set in Jeddah and *The Dove's Necklace* in Mecca. *The Critical Case* does not mention a specific city, but the protagonist describes that he is in a city in eastern Saudi Arabia. The author, Aziz Mohammed, was born in Khobar, which could very well be the city where the novel takes place. The three novels also contain much travel to other cities, such as the capital Riyadh. Not surprisingly, there are many descriptions of city life.

The Dove's Necklace

The Dove's Necklace is packed with descriptions of construction projects. It starts as early as the preface: 'The big red X on the side of the house means it's going to be demolished soon. Demolished to make room for a parking garage to house those strange four-wheeled creatures that look as if they're about to take over Mecca, just like in the stories of the apocalypse' (8). This description immediately sets the tone: cars – and what better symbol for oil prosperity than this vehicle? – are taking over the city that is slowly being demolished, something that is compared to the apocalypse, to the end of the world. Mecca is described to be one big construction site. One of the most powerful scenes is when one of the characters, Yusuf, manages to sneak into a building site where he sees the bodies of Qur'anic figures in a 'shrouded bundle shaped like a pointed obelisk' (74), which at that moment are enclosed by the fangs of the crane: 'Yusuf shook with terror: those were the bodies of Adam, Eve, and Seth, huddled together defensively as the crane wrenched them out of Abu Qubays and hauled them into the air for eviction' (75). It is a clear example of where the sacred elements of the city, with its rich Qur'anic history, are linked with petromodernity. Yusuf overwhelms the Ethiopian crane-driver and takes his place in the machine: 'He had no choice but to save this ancient treasure from the construction—or rather, destruction—site' (75). In this last sentence lies a critical core. Even though construction companies try to preserve the unique nature of Mecca, the characters of the novel experience it differently: it is not seen as construction but as destruction. On every street corner lies a story, a personal memory of a (grand)parent, or a collective memory about the origins

of Islam. However, many street corners are no longer recognizable. Mu'az, the imam's son, explains how mountains and houses are disappearing 'in the name of progress' by massive corporations with 'their own world order. They don't answer to the laws of any one country' (262). Some of the characters, such as Mu'az, are very aware of the power of the big companies that can make anything happen with the argument of development. However, they cannot do anything about it: Yusuf, for instance, is soon surrounded by the police, after which the work is resumed.

One of the most important real estate companies mentioned throughout the whole novel is Elaf Holdings.[141] When Yusuf is asked to apply for a job at the company, he searches for information and cannot believe what he finds: 'it's like an octopus, with tentacles in companies, factories, hotels, hospitals, private universities, etc. It's an empire on which the sun never sets' (28). Elaf's subsidiaries finalized a deal to purchase a plot of 50.000 square meters in south Mecca, 'to build the most modern food-processing plant in the region, which will comprise six standalone factories as well as centralized storage facilities' (212). In terms of ambition and size, this project brings to mind the AMALAA project described in chapter one.

Yusuf uses very strong words such as genocide, when referring to the demolishing of historical sites: 'The Lane of Many Heads, you, and I are nothing but dots being erased on a map of genocide. We're dots floating in the dust after a city has been ravaged. Dozing eyes, the moment before a city, many cities, are razed to the ground' (467). Yusuf draws the problem more broadly; this is not just happening in Mecca but in many cities. Truly all that is newly built is described in negative terms: 'an ugly rectangular box' (139), 'the products of minds lacking any imagination' (128); 'glass towers that ate into what flesh remained of the bare mountains' (139); 'another perfect tableau of luxuriant nothingness' (200); 'the greedy, ever-expanding city (…) was swallowing it up' (443); the street is a 'steaming corpse' (128).

In the end, the plot revolves not around the murder but the secret plans that the owner of Elaf Holding has for the area surrounding the *Ka'aba*, the same area that, as can be read in chapter one, has actually changed tremendously. Yusuf and Azza confiscate a promotional DVD and cannot fathom the images of the future Mecca on the screen. Everything around the *Ka'aba* had been erased and replaced by a vast marble space: 'Next came another ring of skyscrapers, seven to the right and seven to the left, and in the center two enormous creatures guarding the great idol. (…) They all looked like spaceships that had landed on Earth to besiege the Kaaba in a postmodern metallic standoff' (469).[142] Yusuf wants to reveal Elaf's plans, to prevent the destruction of the most sacred place to Islam and with it all of Mecca. At the same time, he realizes how naïve that sounds, and the reader never finds out what Yusuf does with the information. For the Lane of the Many Heads it is too late anyway. The neighborhood has already become a victim of the building urge. Detective Nasser visits the neighborhood one last time and hardly recognizes the place. Nearly everyone has left and many houses are already knocked down. Nasser wonders: 'who would benefit from this but

[141] A real estate company under the name Elaf Group with a headquarter in Jeddah really exists, see: https://elafgroup.com.
[142] The British writing style or transcribed Arabic of the novels sometimes does not match my writing style. Nevertheless, I do not indicate this in quotations themselves.

Elaf Holdings, who owned most of the land in those areas, and who based on this had just released their plans for the five coming years?' (356) It is a rhetorical question. Nasser knows that only Elaf is going to benefit from it. The residents are being driven out of their neighborhoods by those in power, losing their say and agency, which affects their memories, culture, and lived religion. While at the same time, big corporations like Elaf building with oil money, have free rein: they bend the rules to their will and change the life in Mecca and far beyond.

Throwing Sparks

The same narrative is reflected in *Throwing Sparks*. The main character, Tariq, looks back on his life in Jeddah, starting with the most important event of his childhood: the construction of a large palace. Tariq describes that the palace was built 'with its back to our neighbourhood, in an arc that enveloped the north of the city and extended all the way out to the sea' (28). Like the Lane with the Many Heads, Tariq's neighborhood is also poor. Tariq explains that most districts were no longer inhabited 'by the original settlers' (141), but were populated by more recent arrivals, a motley collection of people from all over the country, especially 'Bedu from outlying desert areas' (142) and many migrants from 'communities of Yemenis, Levantine Arabs, Egyptians, Sudanese, Somalis and Eritreans, as well as Indians, Afghans, Indonesians, Chadians, Chinese and Kurds, and Bokhari Uzbeks, Turkmen, and Kyrgyz' (142). This is in line with chapter one: in the 1970s and 1980s, many foreign workers were recruited and many tribal members – the Bedu referred to by Tariq, also known as Bedouin – began to migrate to the city. The novel reveals how the city's architecture and the composition of the population is changing.

The new palace was visible from every direction and anyone entering Jeddah would see it: 'But while the Palace was there for everyone to behold, few were granted the privilege of seeing the man who built it' (25). The name of the neighborhood was soon forgotten. The western part, the Palace District, became 'Paradise' and the eastern part 'Firepit'. The palace divided the neighborhood in two: where the 'ordinary' people live and where, behind high walls, mysterious things happen. The construction of the palace had dried up the sea before the neighbor's eyes and in Tariq's words, 'hundreds of tonnes of cement had walled in our tears, which seeped into our souls and collected there in pools of sadness and regret' (27). Access to the sea was blocked 'only after the city began drowning in a flood of money, and everyone – individuals and companies alike – scrambled to suck on the udder of pumped-up riches' (58), the seafront was parcelled off to the highest bidders. The same story unfolds here as in Raja Alem's Mecca: soil becomes increasingly expensive and new buildings, ornamental statues, and 'the latest models in luxury cars, yachts and motor boats' (29) become more important than nature. Each new building symbolizes the problems arising from the uneven distribution of Saudi oil wealth. In *The Dove's Necklace*, Nasser wonders who benefits from the new construction projects. In *Throwing Sparks*, Tariq is firmer: after the city councilors and their retinue of bureaucrats, lawyers, brokers and developers all got their share, 'nothing was left for the rest of the population' (52). A highly poetic scene is about the fisherman-poet Hamed, for whom the building of the palace literally becomes his death:

> [He] watched this vast carpeting of the sea with tears in his eyes and redoubled his output of free-flowing verses. But his voice could not compete with the roar of the engines and he watched helplessly as the new concrete jungle was poured over the sea that had given him life and cradled him. When the driver of a bulldozer reached his skiff's mooring spot, Hamed could not bear the sight any longer and he threw himself in front of it. By the time his body could be pulled free, his family had already dug a grave for him at the cemetery. (55)

Tariq also describes how the new promenade was adorned with sculptures by international artists and 'kept gleaming by an army of labourers' (51). For many, just being on the promenade was something to boast about but it also deepened their sense of grievance when they 'remembered what this length of asphalt did to us' (51). This reveals the mixed feelings about oil wealth: the children in the 'Firepit' know that the new promenade is something to brag about, it makes them feel different from children from even more remote neighborhoods, but there is also grief at seeing the asphalt that changed so much. The building of the palace, and with it the inaccessibility of the sea, was 'more than just screening off the azure sea,' instead 'the concrete walls lining the shore served to split the population, driving a deep wedge between people that was based on inequity and class' (51). This observation by Tariq seems to summarize Khal's whole novel. The palace symbolizes the negative aspects of the twentieth century's rapid economic growth and development. Tariq shows that development is not always progress; it is also the disappearance of nature and playground, and with that the disappearance of the residents' childhood.

The Critical Case

In *The Critical Case*, there are no major construction projects described. However, about modern buildings already built, the protagonist elaborates for pages. An example is the building where he works:

> I raise my head to look at the tower. The entire building is visible and it's easy to find your way to it from anywhere, but the entrance remains hidden and getting to it requires several twists and turns. The closer you get, the more you feel you will never enter. Everything is the way it was yesterday, but the feeling of alienation the building inspires is so strong that somehow it all seems different. (7)

The company building is described as a place that does not change, but at the same time it does evoke much alienation in the main character. The description corresponds to the palace in *Throwing Sparks*: it is a remarkable building that can be seen from all sides, yet it is not accessible to everyone. This is illustrated by the fact that the entrance is hidden. Inside the building is an escalator, 'whose end is invisible from where it starts and which moves endlessly upward, as though it could take you to wherever you want to go' (7). Here the building is described as something elusive with an escalator without end. However, as the protagonist describes, it only takes someone to the elevator lobby. The building is luxurious, with its marble corridor and glass doors separating the departments. The downside is that there is no privacy because of all the glass. Besides, the windows cannot be opened 'in case the design drives someone to suicide' (60). Only one other building is described in as much detail as the one where he works, namely the hospital he visits:

> I climbed the outside steps lightly; they're evenly spaced, close to one another, and so conducive to agility that as soon as you've climbed them, you want to go down again and climb back up. But the door opens in front of you unexpectedly and of its own accord and sucks you in, so you surrender yourself joyfully to the flow of air and traverse the public areas, and even though you may want to ask Reception this or that, you roam around wherever you feel like going, with no goal other than to maintain your progress over the tightly fitted flagstones of this strong, ancient building, this marvellous, solidly built structure. Verily, I love it like a dog and want to pat its head! (110)

In this description, his satirical tone emerges pre-eminently: the stairs are so amazing that one wants to keep climbing them, and once inside the building, one just wants to keep moving. This satirical scene is best explained by emphasizing futility. Both the building of his work and the hospital are described as places where one can wander endlessly. This may sound positive at first, but it is not; in fact, it symbolizes purposelessness, he does not call it 'with no goal' for nothing.

Another scene worth mentioning is about his grandfather. In the middle of the old neighborhood is a house, 'a kind of Kaaba, around which the other houses have grown up' (104). This is his grandfather's house. Once, it was empty land, but when his father started renting residential buildings, it became a lively neighborhood. After a while, many residents moved to a better part of the city, leaving the neighborhood 'old and shabby' (104). However, his grandfather 'used to speak of the building as though it were entitled to the status of a sixth son' (104). His loss of prestige only made him 'rougher and harsher' (104), telling his children that 'they were good for nothing and that they and the generation that came after them were a burden on the land. For him, time came to a halt with his generation and nothing lay ahead but a slackness that could lead only to collapse' (104). This scene uncovers his interpretation of Saudi Arabia's history: a rapidly changing and urbanizing country where increased prosperity ultimately leads to collapse. His grandfather insists on staying in his old neighborhood, which he is proud of, something the 'new generation' does not do; they only disperse to more upmarket quarters.

To sum up, the idea of a redesigned *Ka'aba* (*The Dove's Necklace*) and the palace in 'Paradise' (*Throwing Sparks*) symbolizes the clash between tradition/history and modernity/development. They visualize the gap between rich and poor, between those with power derived from oil money and those without agency. The setting, the two neighborhoods, is deployed and a dividing line is literally placed in the public space. *The Critical Case* does not write about the excessive building projects that started forty years ago. However, it does share many similarities with the other two novels. New buildings are considered negative: soulless, cold, and designed to have no privacy. On a less obvious note, the protagonist's company building is also a symbol such as the future *Ka'aba* and the palace. This building shows the same contradiction between those with power and those who must go along with the system. In the three novels, it becomes clear that the influence of space on everyday life is enormous. Visible changes are symbolic for much more: not only the environment of a petrostate changes but with it also norms and values, as becomes especially clear in the next section.

2.3 Work: Modern Slaves of the Petrocapitalist System

In all three novels, work has an important role. In *Throwing Sparks* and *The Critical Case*, the plots even revolve around the main characters' work. In *The Dove's Necklace*, there is a motley set of jobs: Nasser the detective, Aisha the teacher, Yusuf the historian, Al-Ashi the cook, Yabis the sewage cleaner, and Khalil the taxi driver. Characters are often introduced by reference to their work. In this section I focus on the characters' description of their own and others' job activities, colleagues, and bosses.

The Critical Case

In *The Critical Case*, the protagonist has been working as an IT graduate for an oil company for three years. He calls it the Eastern Petrochemicals Company: 'this is appropriate as we are in the eastern, oil-rich, part of this country' (13). It is a large company, providing a guaranteed future, and that is the only thing that matters for him. After his father dies, he chooses to study IT only because it offers security: 'This specialization was said to be in demand in the labor market, and what more can anyone ask than to be in demand in the labor market? One has to earn one's living somehow (…)' (14). Despite the job security, he does not have a good word to say about his work; it is merely a necessary evil.

The novel is very critical of the corporate world. Tasks are made up so that everyone always has something to do, the director wants people to postpone their days of leave on the excuse that the department was in urgent need 'during those critical days and all our days in the department were critical' (15), and extra work hours are not compensated, instead 'the employee was supposed to work them out of concern for the company's interests' (16). This does not only apply to oil companies. Nevertheless, the fact the author chose to have it be a petrochemicals company says enough. The oil industry is still the most important sector and has shaped the corporate sector of Saudi Arabia. It irritates the protagonist that the company acts as if its employees are incredibly important, calling them 'Unknown Warriors', while in his opinion, they are not: 'How strange the expression "Unknown Warriors" seemed in relation to working for a petrochemicals company, although somehow it always managed to raise the employees' spirits' (16). The 'Unknown Warriors', are in the protagonist's words, 'terrifying models of commitment' (16). He never saw them eat or go to the toilet. Their entire existence was dedicated to work, and 'they had, with the discipline of genuine warriors, subjugated their bodily needs to fit their work schedules' (16). This description of his coworkers shows that he views them as robots, they are dehumanized. As the protagonist describes it, the whole company seems like a façade. No one knows exactly what their colleagues are doing; sometimes, they do not even know what they themselves are doing. They are all part of a well-oiled machine with no place for the individual. He goes so far as to speak of people as God's workers: 'I've long thought that people live as though they were God's employees, not his worshippers' (141).

He describes that the complexion of the old man working next to him has acquired a dullness from its days between the company's walls. He fantasizes that it was not always like that: 'his appearance seems of a piece with the life of the old mariners and of the men who hunted for pearls in the depths of the Gulf, and

that may indeed have been his profession before the oil cast him up at this desk' (16). The difference could not be more tremendous: from a direct form of labor, outside and sun tanned, to work inside, behind a laptop, with a sallow complexion. The protagonist seems to be nostalgic for professions such as sailor and pearl hunter. However, although he hates his job, he knows he is better off than the laborers:

> If any feeling of anger at this situation should seize you, at the end of a long, hard day of work, all you need to do is look, on your way home, at the laborers crammed into buses, none of them with the energy left to hold up their heads, their necks still red from the burning sun that has been roasting them all day, their heads swaying in the open windows of the vehicles, which are themselves worn out and which distribute themselves through the streets in numbers large enough to remind you that you are better off than their passengers and should thank God' (62-63).

The protagonist is a melancholic person who defends his individuality against a social and economic system that threatens to overwhelm him. Gradually, he gets obsessed with the idea of suffering. He wants a painful experience that will form his identity. This obsession is connected to his feelings at work: 'When I'm older and try to write about this period of my life, what will I remember? My endless personal absence from my own memory! The void in it will be filled by the long days of work, without any clear remembrance of their details, just that feeling of wasting time, of exhaustion, sleeplessness, and endless clicking on the mouse' (43). For him, work means spending the best half of the day working 'relentlessly to swell the pockets of the company's stockholders and strengthen your director's chances of promotion while submitting to systems and laws stranger than you'd find in the silliest dystopian novel' (62). He is a slave of the petrocapitalist system: a middle-class man without agency and no pleasure in his job. Oil has shaped modern life and this character detests that life. It is most clearly expressed in the death of his colleague. He passed away a week after his retirement, giving the impression that that is the logical sequence of events: the end of work also means the end of life. The purposelessness that spoke from his descriptions of the buildings, he now mentions literally: 'You surprise yourself with your capacity for patience, your capacity to pass long years, even entire decades (…) only to discover at the end that you free yourself from that situation only to die. But what else can you do?' (63)

Throwing Sparks

The lack of agency and being just a nameless individual in a larger picture seamlessly matches the descriptions of Tariq, the protagonist of *Throwing Sparks*. In the Palace, he belongs to a group known as the 'Punishers' (39). Tariq explains: 'Our given names were unnecessary to our roles and we were known by the jobs we performed. No one asked about anyone's past' (41). This is similar to *The Critical Case*: they are a number, not a person with their own story. The most significant difference with *The Critical Case* is that Tariq is doing violent work. In his words: 'I had chosen an immoral line of work, and performing my job had ruined my life and deadened my soul' (43). He is the executioner and must rape the opponents of his boss. His boss, the Master, is very wealthy and corrupt, making his own rules: 'Principles and values had no place there; we espoused whatever values the moment dictated, whichever ones best suited the Master's mood' (140).

As mentioned earlier, the building of the palace and the inaccessibility of the sea were among the most critical events in the lives of Tariq's neighbors. The construction of the palace also affected traditional forms of work. The fishermen were the first to suffer from the exclusion from their fishing grounds: 'one after the other collected his fishing tackle and bid a heart-broken farewell to the sea. Their traditional way of life was gone for ever, buried as surely as the surf that once lapped at their feet' (52). With the arrival of the palace the neighborhood 'choked with people' and 'all means of livelihood had dried up' (48). After the fishermen had to give up fishing and the old artisanal trades died out, all that was left for the neighbors were jobs 'that emaciated their bodies and brought in meagre incomes' (48).

Tariq's father was considered one of Jeddah's master builders. However, with the advent of modern construction, his father became 'a mere foreman' (113). His father felt diminished in this subordinate capacity and resented complying with engineers' instructions. While checking on a possible error in the beam supports of a roof structure, he fell off a scaffold and died. This resonates with the old colleague of the protagonist of *The Critical Case*, who died immediately after his retirement. With all the technological advances, Tariq's father was no longer needed. As soon as someone is no longer needed, he dies.

The palace could have provided many new jobs. However, this is not the case. In the beginning, the Master gave local boys short-term jobs, for example, gardening. But then he does not want to employ 'anyone who had a national identity card' (68). What remained were jobs as executioners and punishers, as Tariq has, or as a prostitute during the biggest parties. Foreign workers filled the 'ordinary' jobs. Palace staff were brought in from around the world, 'while the locals looking for work were stopped from even reaching the main gates' (68).

Through Tariq's eyes, the reader is introduced to the residents of the Firepit. He describes many of his neighbors who currently live in poverty: '[Children] clung to mothers worn down by the daily grind of their lives and the battle to keep their frail children alive' (48). This shows that Saudi cities are not merely prosperous. It becomes apparent when he introduces Abu Yunus, a 'bone-weary plumber' (38) who worked day and night but 'never made enough money to buy a house for his ever-growing number of offspring' (38). Tariq's generation was raised on fantasies: 'Our sole inheritance was the jealousy that showed in our eyes as we leered at the mounds of savoury food, designer clothing and luxury cars, at the rivers of cash in shops and at the women who wandered through the souk' (48). Tariq describes the well-to-do middle class as well: neighbors who travel abroad and who are 'acquiring what had been beyond their means previously' (59). The children of Tariq's generation can afford just a bit more luxury than their parents. Nevertheless, the novel expresses little appreciation for this. The majority is just a plaything of the wealthy and powerful elite; they only dream of more and must squint their eyes when they are wronged, for example, when their land is expropriated.

Tariq is aware of the class differences that exist from a person's birth. He was able to break free from the poor environment he grew up in, but at a very high price: his soul. He does the most horrible things to

people to keep the Master satisfied. The Master breathes limitlessness and greed. Different rules apply in his palace: alcohol, sodomy, naked women, and corruption. Power creates more power, and money makes more money.

The Dove's Necklace

What is the Master in *Throwing Sparks* is Sheikh Khalid al-Sibaykhan in *The Dove's Necklace*. He is the wealthy and powerful owner of the real estate company Elaf Holdings. Yusuf describes him as 'the bulldozers on all our mountains' and 'the sin that has possessed us all' (467). He is corrupt and has his wife raped by an influential acquaintance. He throws the biggest parties, and just like the Master's parties, they are full of naked women and alcohol. Mu'az visits the wedding of Al-Sibaykhan's secretary. He was mesmerized by the drums, the colored glass and the jewels around him and wonders: 'Where did luxury like this even come from? (…) Where did Mecca hide all these nude-clothed women? They were unreal. They were woven from cyber-fantasies and science fiction and grandmothers' fairytales: "Beauty sculpted by hand or by God Himself?"' (264-265). This shows an irreconcilable difference between rich and poor in Jeddah. The rich are so rich that ordinary citizens cannot even fantasize about such wealth.

Like the protagonist in *The Critical Case*, Yusuf contemplates the concept of work. He is on the bus trying to define his 'petroleum generation' while observing the workers (27). He mentions that the bodies of the fellow passengers can tell a story in sweat:

> Like the sweat of this worker who just sat down with his plastic bag, stained with oily chicken and rice; he's between a rock and a hard place. He's in a rush to get to the building site where only yesterday one of his friends fell off the top of the scaffolding. They waited for hours for a vehicle—any vehicle—before they could take him, finally, to the nearest clinic in the back of a truck, racing against death. They were charged four hundred riyals just to have him admitted, and he ended up dying on one of their stretchers. The sweat of these men tries to wash over me, tries to seep out of me; it says we're all running from a construction site to a destruction site. (27)

As in *Throwing Sparks*, a work accident is discussed and a middle-class character recognizes that he has it easier than the working class. Not only is Yusuf aware of this, but detective Nasser also reflects on the municipality workers cleaning the Meccan streets: 'Faced with those mountains of trash, he would have lost his mind a long time ago, but they just carried on, earning only the meagerest salaries, shielding their heads from the Meccan sun that turned their uniforms to dust. They were there at their positions every morning' (101-102). Nasser almost takes offense at how steadfastly the workers carry out their underpaid work. He knows how bad the conditions of the lower class are, how they live in 'tiny coal rooms' and are 'huddled in the bathroom of a dilapidated house' (114).

In the novel, migrants have a very prominent role. They are described as a new generation 'splitting the physical and human geography of Mecca into two classes: the improvisers—whose one care in the world is selling as much as they can of whatever they can—and the consumers' (27). This is not only true in Mecca but can be seen as a metaphor of any capitalist society: the producers and sellers on the one side, and the

careless, thoughtless consumers on the other side. With the only similarity: that they both want more and more.

Many migrants without a Saudi residency are waiting around Jeddah airport. One of the characters, Mushabbab ,explains: 'this is where everyone who wants to abandon the petroleum paradise flees to. Here in the open air is where workers take refuge when they're waiting to be picked up by the immigration police' (107). Either to pay for a residence permit or to be deported. The reader catches a glimpse of the terrible conditions around the airport: 'Stretching before us was an expanse half a kilometer wide, carpeted with men and women of all colors and races. The image of people assembled for the Day of Judgment came to mind' (107). Another character, the Eunuchs' Goat observes the painful paradox between the wealthy city and the poor undocumented workers: 'their place had been taken by the smells of human urine and desperation, a pungent odor rising from behind the trunks of ornamental Washington palms, in the blueness of the Saudi Airlines office across the way and the continuously replenished ATM with a camera's eye to guard it. The Eunuchs' Goat felt like the ATM screen was following him as it repeated cheerfully, "Welcome to this automated teller service." Automated deportation service…' (108).

The Eunuchs' Goat is Turkish and explains to Mu'az what undocumented migrants like him can accomplish: 'They don't have anything to lose. You should see our little kingdom: castles on the mountainside, hiding places beneath rotting garbage heaps that even dogs wouldn't venture into. Police and Immigration can't reach us there. We're an army of people waiting to be discovered for what we are. Down in the ground we extract the gold from your garbage' (451). This is the second time in the novel that waste has a significant role. Garbage is used as a metaphor to reveal the conditions of society. The Eunuchs' Goat explains: 'If we stop recycling, garbage will overwhelm you and us and swallow the entire world. Everything you throw away is added to the monster; that's why we can't just shut our eyes, relax, fall in love, and settle down somewhere outside the dump where our kids won't get asthma and cancer' (451). The illegal migrants live in the garbage dumps and sewers and are recycling the waste of the 'real' Saudis above ground. The metaphor of waste works very well: the wealthy corporate people depend on undocumented migrants. In this way the novel reflects on the position of the 12 million migrant workers in Saudi society. They are not directly visible, but they clean up the wealthy's mess, literally and figuratively. Without the migrants, the whole system will fall apart, or as the Eunuchs' Goat says: 'garbage will overwhelm' the Saudi citizens.

In summary, the Master and the Sheikh in *Throwing Sparks* and *The Dove's Necklace* do morally reprehensible things. They are described as greedy caricatures formulating their own rules. Their workers are merely seen as numbers, as part of a collective that cleans up their mess. The same can be said for the Unknown Warriors in *The Critical Case*. In the novels, it becomes clear how significant the difference between classes is. Even the 'ordinary' citizens can sometimes barely keep their heads above water. The well-to-do middle class, like *The Critical Case*'s protagonist, hates his work and life in modern society as well. There is not one positive word for the petrocapitalist system; every employee is described as a victim, lacking pleasure and agency in their work.

2.4 The Body: Decrepit or Vivacious Bodies?

The last category is the broadest and the least framed. In the novels, the body and physicality are used to convey ideas about oil wealth. In this section I examine female bodies, disabled bodies, and sick bodies. How do the characters perceive their own and others' bodies? In both *Throwing Sparks* and *The Dove's Necklace*, violence has such a prominent role that it must be included in the analysis.

Throwing Sparks

In *Throwing Sparks*, everyone who serves at the palace has some kind of disability. Tariq explains: 'A casual visitor might think well of the Master for taking on so many disabled people and providing them with dignified if humble employment' (15), but he knows better: 'such disabilities were the inevitable fate of anyone who remained long enough at the Palace' (15). Every able-bodied person who started work for the Master expected to acquire an impairment and could only pray that it would not prove fatal. The Master is so powerful that he can do whatever he wants with people. This takes on extraordinary forms of violence, as Tariq describes: 'As one adept at mutilation, he filled his Palace with a variety of human puppets and his incessant abuse left no one whole: eyes were gouged, limbs broken, hair and nails pulled out. Some were burned, others castrated and still others were emotionally maimed or made chronically sick' (16). The Master sees the people who work for him, and even in people in general, as puppets and dolls. The palace staff is described as dehumanized: 'we were all begging and panting dogs' (120). Tariq states they feel only vaguely human. Tariq often refers to bodies instead of people, as if they are just physical persons with no soul and no individual characteristics. The people outside the palace are 'decrepit and haggard bodies', while the rich people inside the palace, have 'vivacious' (176) and 'undulating' (19) bodies full of desire. This can be viewed as a metaphor for how the divide between rich and poor is seen throughout Saudi society.

Not only does Tariq have to mutilate other people, but in doing so, he also mutilates himself. His body is bruised and affected by the crimes he commits for the Master: 'Standing in the punishment chamber, I would contemplate my naked body, bruised and degraded by the cruel and brutal acts it had performed' (7). This is a stark contrast with his first day at the palace when he is submitted to a thorough scrubbing: 'Every dead and dry cell on my body was exfoliated, my skin was conditioned with almond, walnut and pomegranate oils, lotions and ointments were rubbed on and, finally, a dusting of warm-scented powder was applied to attenuate the shine. I glowed' (137). However, immediately after this cleansing, his first task awaits him. He needs to rape an opponent of the Master. Apparently, he needed to be clean to become dirty.

Tariq must strip the Master's opponents of their manhood through sodomy. However, Tariq not only mutilates people for his work, which gives him access to all luxury he could ever have wanted, but he also does it in his personal life, with the prime example being his aunt. Tariq hates his aunt: 'There was simply never a moment when she was not mean' (96). He describes her by materials: 'Aunt Khayriyyah was a thin, hard woman, inflexible as a tempered steel rod; even her smell was vaguely metallic' (95). This description

fits nicely with how negatively Tariq describes the palace and other new construction projects. The metallic smell can refer to the metallic scent of blood. However, here it seems like it is a reaction to something broader: development and modernity.

His aunt is called a 'woe-man' by the whole neighborhood. She acts in a way society may describe as more masculine: aggressive, stubborn, bossy, and proud. In a horrifying scene, Tariq cuts off his aunt's tongue, literally silencing her (170-173). Would he have done this if she had been a man? The reader can not know, but it is clear he specifically detests her masculine traits. It suggests that his violent nature does stem from misogyny. Not for nothing did he rape two girls in his childhood. Several times Tariq calls women 'flesh' and makes a connection between capitalism and the female body by saying: 'Little girls learn very young that their smile is marketable, and that is the first step to perdition' (100).

The Dove's Necklace

A character similar to Tariq's aunt Khayriyyah can be found in Umm al-Sa'd in *The Dove's Necklace.* The women from the neighborhood the Lane of Many Heads call Umm al-Sa'd 'Steelballs' behind her back. Umm al-Sa'd learned how to use the stock market online and increased her wealth. The neighborhood looks at her with admiration and envy:

> "Women like Umm al-Sa'd must have enormous vaginas that are capable of swallowing up the entire stock exchange, the Lane of Many Heads, and even death itself all in one go!" The idiotic thought took root in the women's minds as they watched Umm al-Sa'd penetrate the market, leaning toward her computer without bothering to sit up. (...) I'm certain that if the women of the Lane of Many Heads were ever allowed to nominate their own candidate to chair the local council, there wasn't a single man who'd dare challenge Steelballs. She could win all the women's hearts with a mere flick of her index finger. (83)

Not to mention all the sexual descriptions of Umm al-Sa'd penetrating the market and her vagina swallowing everything, Umm al-Sa'd is portrayed as an influential person in the neighborhood. Money and knowledge made her powerful. Where Umm Al-Sa'd knows everything about the stock market and collects money from the residents to increase it for them, her husband Al-Ashi has no idea: 'He didn't understand anything about that empire of numbers whose swells and ebbs his wife monitored constantly. The only thing it meant to him was that she'd embrace him with all the frustration and power of her broad shoulders, flat chest, and masculine frame' (83). Here, the financially independent woman is described as very masculine, one, as the reader soon finds out, that is infertile as well.

Another similarity between this novel and *Throwing Sparks*, is the connection between gender and capitalism. Just before the character Nora is raped by an acquaintance of her husband Sheikh al-Sibaykhan she tries to object. He becomes furious and says:

> "You think you're worth a cent to me? Cheap flesh like yours? The world's a market and it's packed full of the best kinds of fresh meat, fresher than you even. Every day hotter, fitter bodies are

> brought to market. It makes me sick just to think about all the flesh that gets thrown at my feet. Who do you think you are? This is a hypermarket with shelves and shelves of tits and ass, so much for so cheap it turns your stomach. I could import bodies like yours and stock them in my freezer. You're nothing. Nothing." (439)

It is an unambiguous description of how this rich man thinks about women. The view corresponds seamlessly to that of Tariq and the Master. Whereas the excessive violence in *Throwing Sparks* is primarily directed against unknown opponents of the Master, the violence here is directed at the female body. Many of the women in the novel have no agency over their bodies. They must be covered and civilized but, at the same time, be distinctly feminine and sexy. They are seen as market commodities and must go along with the wishes of the powerful rich. Even though there are examples of resistance – the character Marie, a Lebanese woman, is a symbol of modernity and fights the oppression –, most women are oppressed and squeezed in the struggle between those who are trying to maintain the historic city of Mecca and those who are trying to destroy it in the name of modernity.

The Critical Case

In *The Critical Case*, the body has an entirely different function. The second part of the novel revolves around the sick body. The protagonist becomes seriously ill, suffering from leukemia. Interestingly, this shows how his insurance policy, hospital, and company are inextricably linked. The hospital's appointments system already demonstrates this as it is coordinated with the company's system: he never has to call in sick himself, as everything is updated automatically (64). However, the most important connection is that his work pays for his treatment: 'This filled me with a sense of triumph, as I'd be forcing my company to squander its wealth on treating me, a thought that gave me comfort throughout the signing of all those papers. Take this operation, you bastards, and these medicines, and pay for this room at the hospital, and agree to bear the costs of these tests! Go on, pay for your employee! He deserves it' (90). Saudi Arabia's oil prosperity works out positively for the protagonist. There is an advanced healthcare system, and he can be treated in his own country without worrying about money. However, the protagonist himself experiences it entirely differently. He emphasizes his dependence on his work to get treatment. The first day he returns to the office after his first treatment, he wants to submit his resignation letter. His boss explains how his resignation would mean the loss of the medical insurance whose expenses the company currently bore: 'I could instead take a three-month sick leave, with full salary paid for the first month and half salary for the remaining two' (30). He decides to stay. Three months of free medical insurance is not something he could refuse. He thinks he can finally leave the hopeless, aimless job he hates, but in the end, he has no option but to stay.

Despite the highly developed healthcare system, he is not satisfied with the fact that: 'the insurance policy required I be treated only at the company-specified hospital, which was always stuffed with patients of every description, so that one was rarely lucky enough to get an appointment within a week, or even a month, of falling sick' (64). The system is also subject to bureaucracy: 'When the papers were finished, we still had a few administrative procedures ahead of us and he had to go by the office of the head physician

to get them endorsed. It is astonishing that bureaucracy has found its way to this institution too. Maybe you can never be liberated from it, no matter where you go, for even your death can only be made complete via signed papers establishing your demise' (90). This gives an interesting insight into how Saudi institutions sponsored by oil money are perceived in the novel.

After the three-month sick leave, the protagonist is too ill to return to work. His body decided for him to go into compulsory retirement. The only real disadvantage is the cancellation of the health insurance that covers the treatment. He will be paying the remaining hospital bills from his service benefits and savings. Money begins to motivate his choice of follow-up treatment. Nevertheless, the forced resignation brings something good as well. While his entire family wants him to continue with new kinds of treatments, even though they barely seem to be effective – after all, you are in control of your own life, happiness, and future – the protagonist's ill body gives him something he never had: an identity. Ultimately, because of his illness, he manages to resist and let go of all the external judgments: 'it is as though my preservation of the self, during a disease that strips one of his identity, is dependent on the continuation of this resistance' (191). The novel explicitly critiques the modern, neoliberal, petrocapitalist ideas of social engineering and self-optimization. The protagonist is highly satirical and critical of the corporate world and the healthcare system. He lost his identity because he only worked for someone else's sake. While he reaps the benefits of Saudi oil wealth he feels like he is living in a golden cage. He despises his company, but it is ultimately through the company, through oil money, that he may be cured of his disease.

To sum up, in *Throwing Sparks* and *The Dove's Necklace*, the role of excessive violence is very important. Violence against bodies and the dehumanization and capitalization of bodies result from the power of the wealthy. Gender inequality is a fundamental issue in *The Dove's Necklace*. There is a great focus on the deformed and ill body. The most crucial difference is that the affected bodies in *Throwing Sparks* and *The Dove's Necklace* are victims, while the ill body in *The Critical Case* gives the protagonist his agency and identity back, which is something positive.

2.5 Conclusion

At first glance, *Throwing Sparks* and *The Dove's Necklace* seem to have the most similarities. They describe a more extended period in recent Saudi history. However, *The Critical Case* also fits in surprisingly well. The three novels are satirical: they exaggerate, highlighting almost only the negative sides of oil wealth. The differences between the socioeconomic levels of the different characters make exposure to the positive and negative aspects of oil wealth a varied experience. Some characters have almost no access to Saudi's oil wealth, like the Eunuchs' Goat in *The Dove's Necklace.* Their problems are very existential: it is about staying alive. Others have access to prosperity, like Tariq, the protagonist of *Throwing Sparks*, but at a considerable cost. Tariq recognizes that it is the greediness of his Master, and of himself, that has made him feel dead inside. An analysis of the middle-class protagonist of *The Critical Case* shows how he faces problems as well. In the grand scheme of things, these seem less urgent, though they are essential for him: the loss of his identity.

Money controls the lives of the characters to a greater or lesser degree. In *The Critical Case*, this becomes clear since the protagonist equates money with security and lets his choices for study, work and future depend on it. In a more extreme case, there is Nora from *The Dove's Necklace*. Nora's husband is so rich and powerful that she is a plaything of his wishes. She is raped by a man with the knowledge of her partner. Her body is in the same hands as the ones in power over the reconstruction of Mecca. In one of the last scenes of *The Dove's Necklace,* the reader finds out that even detective Nasser, who symbolizes the Saudi legal system, has gone for the money and along with it, corruption. The more money – oil money – the less bound to rules the people at the very top of the pyramid are, making the experience of oil and oil wealth an experience of one's social class.

The novels fit seamlessly with the information given in chapter one on the Saudi context: from how Mecca has actually been rebuilt to issues surrounding undocumented migrant workers. However, the similarities extend beyond a factual and thematic level. It can be concluded that the novels perceive space, work, and the body in a similar, more abstract way. It is a question of power: who is building, who gives the orders, who has agency over residencies, environment and even bodies? The thematic close reading of the novels could partly answer these questions: the power is with the people who became rich from oil, making it clear how the novels used the three themes, space, work, and the body, to reflect on oil wealth and petrocapitalism.

Conclusion: Critic-*oil* on Oil

This thesis started from the perspective that there is an oil unconscious in cultural productions. According to Roman Bartosch, petrocultures are not just phenomena in need of faithful representation but imaginative and intellectual quandaries whose narration relies on finding ways of expressing this 'petroleum unconscious'.[143] There are no twenty-first century translated Saudi novels considering the oil industry. However, there are novels that reveal and express the hidden consequences of oil. Inspired by the relatively new field of energy humanities, this thesis analyzed three contemporary Saudi novels nominated or awarded with the International Prize of Arabic Fiction, to examine their reflections on oil wealth, contributing to the debate on petroculture. The hypothesis was that oil wealth was considered a mixed blessing.

With a comparative thematic close reading, I could answer the research question: In what way do the 21st-century Saudi novels *Throwing Sparks*, *The Dove's Necklace*, and *The Critical Case of a Man Called K* reflect on the impacts of oil wealth? After carefully examining the novels through a petrointersectional lens it can be concluded that the observations about the consequences of oil wealth are very negative. The image that emerges from the novels is not, as expected, of a mixed blessing but a curse. None of the characters were pleased with the positive effects of oil wealth, such as increased mobility and access to healthcare. Instead, the literary works are highly satirical and critical of the petrocapitalist society. A comparison with previous Saudi novels should be made to see if oil wealth was always presented negatively or if it is something new. The novels suggest that there is an awareness in Saudi society of the enormous impact that oil has had and continues to have.

Regarding the theme of space, all three novels similarly discussed the built environment and the changing city. Every new building is perceived as a soulless building, lacking in imagination, despite its rich appearance with shiny tiles, marble, and glass. The buildings are visible changes symbolizing the disappearance of nature and tradition due to oil wealth. In terms of work, it became clear that there is a great difference between poor and rich. Middle-class characters know that they live in better conditions than the working class and the (undocumented) migrants. The differences between the socioeconomic levels of the different characters make exposure to the impact of oil wealth a varied experience. Some characters have almost no access to Saudi's oil wealth, while others have access to prosperity at a massive cost. The three novels criticize wealthy people: their morals are missing, and they formulate their own rules. The last category, the body, was the broadest. Therefore, those findings vary. In *The Critical Case*, the body of the protagonist is ill. That allows him to formulate an identity in the petrocapitalist world he despises. In this novel, the sick and disabled body has a positive function. In *The Dove's Necklace*, the female body lacks agency, and in *Throwing Sparks*, all bodies are affected, lacking agency. In the novels, people are hardly perceived as people; they are dehumanized by speaking of them as bodies. The function of extreme

[143] Bartosch, 'The Energy of Stories,' 117.

violence and the mutilation of bodies is to show the negative impact of oil wealth. The novels each appeared to revolve around power. Who has power over the buildings, work, and bodies? The answer lies in the critique of petrocapitalism from which a powerful elite has emerged that does not have to abide by the rules of society, law, and Islam. In essence, the three categories show how petromodernity, which has been introduced as a new paradigm in recent decades, has radically altered the framework of traditional Saudi culture, mainly in a negative sense.

There is much that has not been addressed in this thesis: the numerous other domains in which petroleum is extensively used and has its influence, such as clothing, cosmetics, law, politics, and education. This is inevitable given the limited space and scope. Nonetheless, I want to indicate a further path that I believe the field of petrocultural studies could take to reflect on shifting views toward gender, race, and class. The influence of gender, and gender violence, could have been a whole thesis subject; instead, it was merely a part of the literary analysis. There was also little focus on race and ethnicity. With the three categories, I have only taken a first step in showing how the categories are connected to each other and to oil.

Another interesting subject is the literal relationship between literature and fossil fuels. A literary text can relate itself to its originating modes of production by making them its objects.[144] What is the relationship between literary texts and the energy sources which make them possible? It could be a question for a next project: to what extent is literary production in Saudi Arabia itself constrained by cultural and material contests over natural resources? Just as my interest has been aroused by the possible differences and similarities between IPAF novels and novels that do not move in the international field and between novels from Saudi Arabia and other oil states.

A final important note relates to the plans by Saudi Arabia to diversify its economy. These plans associated with the vision — for example, the focus on religious tourism as one of the primary non-oil industries — will probably change the citizens' daily lives and transform cultural production in the coming years. Contemporary novels present a satirical picture of Saudi society where there is much room for taboo subjects such as sexuality and violence and they reflect on the great divide between rich and poor. The question is what comes next. Novels about climate change, the problem with burning fossil fuels, and the transition to alternative forms of energy? Or will there be a focus on migration, religion, and an increasing or shrinking gap between rich and poor?

This thesis has revealed how oil wealth is presented in three Saudi novels. It revealed the sometimes hidden influence of oil, showing that the novels are actually impregnated with it, which only further underscores the contemporary definition of petrofiction. Knowing better how the influence of oil and oil wealth is discussed in fiction is a first step to knowing how oil is generally perceived. As long as the oil industry is prominent there will be more petrofiction in all shapes and sizes.

[144] Yaeger, 'Editor's column,' 310.

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