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"Our oil tank is nearly empty": Energy Scarcity, Precarious Lives and the Quest for Sustainable Future in Suzanne Weyn's *Empty*

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Abstract

The present geological era, known as the Anthropocene, is marked by the unprecedented crisis of fossil fuels, especially petroleum, due to the dwindling oil reserves around the world. The petro-capitalist America, which cannot sustain its modernity without a huge supply of crude petroleum, has now been engaged in various oil-wars in African, Arabian and Latin American countries for quenching its thirst for fuel. Oil-producing countries like Nigeria, Venezuela, Iran, etc. which once enjoyed the oil boom, thus, are now suffering from American petro-colonial aggression for the control of oil reserves. Suzanne Weyn's *Empty* (2010) is a poignant expression of the breakdown of American petro-culture due to the scarcity of oil, a non-renewable resource. The novel represents how the American towns–Sage Valley and Marietta–suffer from blackouts, quarantine, food shortage and violence caused by oil crisis after being hit by the super-hurricane OscPearl, an effect of global warming. Michael Watt's idea of "petro-violence" becomes relevant in this context as throughout the novel we find a journalistic description of the armed conflict between America and Venezuela for the possession of what oil is left beneath the earth's surface. This paper focuses on the fictional representation of precarious lives and manifold vulnerabilities of the people of America amid energy crisis by reading the novel from the major perspectives of Petrocriticism. It also focuses on how the novel indicates the necessary energy transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy resources like biofuels, solar energy and wind power for a sustainable future.

Keywords: Fossil Fuel, Energy Crisis, Petro-violence, Precarity, Renewable Resources.

Introduction

International politics in the twenty-first century, to a great extent, revolves around crude oil and the massive revenues generated by it. The present geopolitical tension between Russia and

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Ukraine has greatly impacted the global oil prices by disrupting the supply chains. In the news, we frequently see headlines like "Surge in Ukrainian attacks on oil refineries sparks Russian fuel shortage." (Robinson et al., 2025) The European market, which hitherto purchased a vast quantity of fuel from Russia, has now shifted to other oil-rich countries for its petroleum imports. America, which is at the center of neocolonialist petro-capitalism, has also shown interest in this conflict by preventing other countries from purchasing Russian oil. This is chiefly because for Russia, oil money is a crucial source of revenue for the continuation of its war efforts. American petro-colonial intervention is also evident in Venezuela, an oil-rich country in Latin America where the U.S. military forces are in a constant state of war with the Venezuelan army to gain control over its oil reserves. However, these oil conflicts around the world are no longer a matter of television news that one can consume passively. The soaring oil price caused by the scarcity of petroleum has now compelled every modern man to contemplate on what will happen to our petro-powered engines and vehicles without oil. The growing body of world petro-literature testifies to this petro-imagination which has led many creative writers and activists to express their views on fossil fuel depletion, environmental crisis and oil politics through literature. Thus, the contemporary era has seen the burgeoning of a new interdisciplinary field of scholarship called Energy Humanities. It studies the modern civilisations' troubled entanglement with fossil fuels and the environmental consequences of our oil-driven modernity. In the introduction to their revolutionary work *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*, Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer (2017) point out that one of the central goals of Energy Humanities is to understand how "the energy riches of the past two centuries have influenced our relationship to our bodies, modelled human social relations, and impacted the imperatives of even those varied activities we group together under the term 'culture'." (p. 2) Critical studies in Energy Humanities try to bridge the gulf between our modern culture and the modes of energy which facilitate that culture within a particular geographical local. However, within the greater body of Energy literature, petro-literature emerges as a dominant form which deals with the petroleum industry and the socio-economic and environmental aspects of our modern petro-culture.

Amitav Ghosh (2010), in his review of Abdel Rahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* (1984) titled "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel", argues that unlike the spice trade, the oil encounter has proved "imaginatively sterile" (p. 75) as it has failed to produce "a single work of note." (p. 74) But Ghosh's claim regarding the silence of representation of oil in literature is no longer valid today as we see a plethora of oil narratives around the world like Nawal El Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* (2001), Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010), Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* (2021), etc. Ghosh (2021) himself recently accepts that over "the last fifteen years there has been an enormous outpouring of fiction and nonfiction on subjects that are related in one way or another to the oil encounter." (pp. 20-21) Again, the recent publication of American oil novels like Suzanne Weyn's *Empty* (2010) and Mei Mei Evans' *Oil and Water* (2013) has brought into question Ghosh's earlier statement that there is not yet a "Great American Oil Novel." (Ghosh, 2010, p. 76) However, among the American fiction writers, Suzanne Weyn distinguishes herself through her thrilling science fiction and fantasy novels that especially appeal to young readers. Her *Empty* is a brilliant specimen of American petrofiction where she deals with the socio-cultural and the environmental breakdown of a civilised American society with the help of her juvenile characters. It is a poignant expression of the collapse of American 'petro-culture' due to the scarcity of oil. The novel skillfully represents how the two American towns–Sage Valley and Marietta–succumb to various crises like blackouts, quarantine, food shortage and violence due to the shortage of fossil fuels. The situation is further deteriorated by the super-hurricane, OscPearl, which caused great havoc in the region. This ecodisaster is the culminating effect of global warming caused by the overconsumption of fossil fuels. Thus, this multidimensional, speculative oil-narrative

gives us a serious word of caution about the often-ignored facts of dwindling oil reserves and petroleum-fueled environmental degradation.

Weyn's *Empty* with its explicit criticism of the American petro-colonial aggression leading to oil wars in Venezuela and the environmental harms of oil-driven modernity is of immense critical interest and deserves adequate scholarly attention. But when we search for critical works on this highly important American petrofiction, we are surprised by the fact that although the novel was published more than a decade ago and offers a moving portrayal of the adversities faced by the American people amid fuel crisis, it has hardly received any scholarly attention. However, in the study titled "Mission: Impossible? Teaching Aspects of Sustainability through Children's and Young Adult Literature in English" (2014) by Katrin Holzinger, an attempt has been made to read the novel as a teaching unit focusing on Weyn's depiction of America's overdependence on petroleum. Thus, the purpose of the present paper is to critically examine the representation of petro-colonial-capitalist extractivism, energy crisis and environmental violence in Weyn's *Empty* by reading it from the major perspectives of petrocriticism. It also focuses on the portrayal of precarious lives and manifold vulnerabilities of American people in the face of fuel crisis compounded by the super hurricane, OscPearl, and brings out the necessity of a transition from fossil fuels to sustainable energy resources for a better earth.

Petro-capitalist Extraction and Oil Colonialism

The unparalleled escalation of resource intensive capitalism in the twenty-first century has led to the destructive extraction and exhaustion of vital natural resources. Crude oil or petroleum, among these resources, has long served as the primary source of energy, necessary for sustaining our modern needs. But as we are painfully aware, petroleum is a finite and non-renewable fossil fuel. It is a complex mixture of hydrocarbons formed over millions of years from the remains of ancient living creatures, planktons, shells, corals, etc. that were buried beneath the Earth's crust. Thus, what we burn in seconds in the engines of our petro-powered vehicles is the product of an irreversible eon-long process. Presently, oil has become imbricated with the capitalist pursuit of profit and is extracted through an intricate process which is often violent and harmful to the environment of the host country. Thus, the modern world-system is essentially a petroleum-based capitalism which, according to Imre Szeman, is known as "oil capitalism." It is grounded on the enormous energy produced by fossil fuel burning. Imre Szeman (2007) in his article titled "System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster" has brilliantly pointed out that the success of oil capitalism is "dependent on continuous expansion" for which "cheap and readily available sources of oil" constitute a necessary condition (p. 807). This explains the petro-capitalist logic behind mindless depletion of petroleum resources in the Global South countries like Venezuela which prioritises profit making over the wellbeing of people. That is why petro-capitalist systems are "insensitive to the harm wrought upon the people and the environment." (Varma, 2023, p. 657) In *Empty*, Weyn dexterously represents how the overreliance on a non-renewable resource, petroleum, leads to America's petro-colonialist intervention into the sovereignty of oil-rich Venezuela for the possession of its oil reserves.

The narrative opens with Gwen Jones, one of the central characters in the novel. She is confronted with a new reality in her hometown, Sage Valley, amid fuel crisis. From the roof of her house, she observes that "the ring of dark mountains no longer twinkled with lights from distant houses and stores." (Weyn, 2010, p. 1) On closer inspection, she finds that "the electric turbines in their area", all "powered by oil", have stopped working due to the unavailability of cheap oil (p. 2). Luke, Gwen's brother, further informs her that if the price of gasoline continues to increase at the present rate, they "wouldn't be able to afford the amount" (p. 5) of fuel required to go to school. Here Sage Valley becomes a microcosmic representation of entire

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America which didn't pay heed to the warnings of scientists regarding its dwindling stock of oil. To speak the truth, Saudi Arabia was previously the main supplier of America's oil. But after the depletion of Arabian oil reserves, the American oil companies were convinced that they could start drilling in Alaska, their own soil, which "was going to be the new Saudi Arabia." (p. 7) But unfortunately, "there wasn't as much oil there as they thought" and now it has "almost run out." (p. 7) In the novel, we find a vivid description of how the mindless extraction and overconsumption of petroleum gradually exhausted the oil reserves around the world:

> It had happened quicker than anybody thought it could—country by country, well by well, the oil had stared to dry up. It was right in front of everybody's faces, but they pretended it wasn't happening. They still cranked up their heat in winter and air-conditioning in summer. Reserves were depleted. Alaska was drilled. The prices went higher and higher. (Weyn, 2010, p. 7)

In this tremendous oil crisis, the American Government comes up with the plan of seizing the petroleum resources of other oil-rich nations like Venezuela. In the second chapter, when Tom Harris (a friend of Gwen who lives near her house) asks his mother, "What's going on?" seeing the president Jeffrey Walters at the podium on television, she replies that "We're at war, or about to be" with Venezuela (Weyn, 2010, p. 11). It is revealed that the "long-standing political tension between the United States and the oil-producing country of Venezuela stretched to the breaking point" (p. 12) when Venezuela asks for a price hike in their oil. However, there is a significant reason behind this demand. After the depletion of Alaskan and Canadian oil fields, "America's consumption of Venezuelan oil" surged from "20 percent to 60" within a year (p. 12). Siezing the opportunity that America has hardly "any place left" to "go for its oil" (p. 13), Venezuela made the call "to raise the oil price to $800 a barrel." (p. 12) But this compulsory increase in the price of Venezuelan oil is considered by America as "an act of aggression" (p. 12) on the part of Venezuela. Consequently, America deployed heavy troops in Venezuela to "seize the refineries that supply American companies" and, in retaliation, Venezuela threatened to "attack the 149 oil refineries that remain in the United States." (p. 13) As a result, an oil war becomes inevitable between economically rich America and oil-rich Venezuela which leads to further acts of petro-violence.

Petro-violence, Energy Scarcity and Precarious Lives

The history of petroleum industry shows that "conflict over the control of natural resources" (Balkan and Nandi, 2021, p. 12) like land and water is a recurring phenomenon in petro-states. Oil industry requires suitable large area of land for drilling oil wells and the construction of oil installations. In most cases, it is found that the occupation of land by the oil companies involves state-backed military violence and the forced displacement of Indigenous people. In Abel Rahman Munif's gulf petrofiction *Cities of Salt*, we find a moving account of how the orchards are destroyed and tress are cut off in order to clear the land for oil drilling. The Indigenous settlement called Wadi al-Uyoun is totally annihilated, making room for the oil field. Again, oil drilling in a populated area renders the poor local people vulnerable to water pollution as oil industry's toxic wastes contaminate waterbodies. The waterbodies like rivers and ponds are indispensable for the survival of the host communities who are mostly ecosystem people. As a result, violent conflicts often ensue between the state-backed oil companies and the local communities regarding the possession of these resources. Again, in petro-states like Venezuela, while the oil companies prosper from oil wealth, the local people are deprived of all sorts of oil benefits. Therefore, they often try to vandalise the pipelines in order to steal oil that they can both use and sell in the black market. Thus, the armed struggle between the state-owned military forces working for the protection of oil pipelines and the local people fighting for their

share of oil is an instance of petro-violence. However, Michael Watts (2001) in his essay titled "Petro-Violence: Community, Extraction, and Political Ecology of a Mythic Commodity" argues that "petro-violence" refers to "both *ecological* violence perpetrated on the biophysical world and social violence—criminality and degeneracy associated with the genesis of petro-wealth." (p. 189) Petro-violence, thus, describes both the violence inflicted on the host environment during oil extraction and also the violence caused by the conflicts for the control of oil reserves. Watts' idea of "petro-violence" becomes highly relevant in the context of Weyn's *Empty* as throughout the novel we find a journalistic account of the armed battle between U.S. and Venezuela for the possession of what oil is left beneath the earth's surface in Venezuela. However, in the novel, we find a movement of petro-violence from the global to the local scale. At first, the global conflict between America and Venezuela mirrors this oil violence, with U.S. seizing "Venezuelan Refineries" and "American Refineries" being "Bombed in Retaliation." (Weyn, 2010, p. 66) It is in these refineries that oil is processed into petrol, diesel, gasoline and other forms of fuel. So, taking control of the oil refineries is essential to gain upper hand in the global war. On the other hand, the novel shows how petro-violence takes place at a local level, with a violent fight erupting between the players of two school football teams (Sage Valley Tigers and Marietta Mariners) "over several incidents of gasoline siphoning." (p. 83) The otherwise peaceful "yearly homecoming bonfire" of Sage Valley High School turns into a pandemonium when "angry words escalated to violence", instigated by smashing of the windshield of the car of "Marietta's team captain." (p. 83) Several school boys are hospitalised and an emergency curfew is declared to take control of the situation. Thus, in one way or another, both the global and the local instances of violence in the novel are caused by oil conforming to the idea of petro-violence.

The novel emphasizes the importance of petroleum in our everyday life. Weyn points out that there are numerous uses of petroleum apart from its primary function as fuel in oil-powered engines. In this regard, Mr. Curtin, the school teacher of Tom, expresses how everything that we use in our daily life is either directly or indirectly made from oil:

> I guess no one–including me–thought the oil would really run out. We had no idea that everything is made from oil– plastic, insecticides, cosmetics–everything. Shampoo and soap are made of hydrocarbons, linked and processed from oil. Bricks and concrete are made with oil. The shingles on our roof. Carpet. Fertilizer. The asphalt we use to pave our roads–that comes from the bottom of the tank after oil is refined. (Weyn, 2010, p. 41)

The complete depletion of oil means that the comforts of life with which modern man has become accustomed will be eternally unavailable. Michael Niblett's idea of "energy regime" becomes relevant in this context. An energy regime, according to Niblett (2017), is defined by "the crucial role" played by the same dominant energy resources "in structuring everyday life" for a continuous period (p. 136). He argues that we are presently living in an energy regime "based upon fossil fuels." (p. 136) Thus, fossil energy crisis in the novel leads to a precarious situation where the citizens are left with no alternative resources to live a life of ease. The title of Weyn's novel *Empty* immediately produces a tremendous sense of absence that petroleum which once seemed plentiful is now on the verge of "running out." (Weyn, 2010, p. 162)

The perilous condition of the people of Sage Valley and Marietta amid the fuel crisis is further intensified by the disaster of super hurricane, OscPearl, that confounds the American towns. In the novel, the climatologists, who are "studying the devastating super-hurricane" at the Benfield Hazard Research Centre in University College, London, suggest that "rise in sea surface temperatures" due to global warming has caused this ecodisaster (Weyn, 2010, p. 99).

Pramod K. Nayar's idea of "ecoprecarity" becomes highly relevant in this context as the American people lead "precarious lives" during the "event of the ecological disaster" and also the entire "environment itself" is "rendered precarious" due to fuel crisis which prevents the situation from recovery (Nayar, 2019, p. 7). In the novel, we find a vivid description of how the citizens of Sage Valley are faced with an uncanny situation when the super hurricane, OscPearl, takes place:

> Desperately in need of services but largely overlooked by agencies […] the citizens of Sage Valley are currently suffering from homelessness, flood-related respiratory diseases, and other sickness, plus an almost complete breakdown in their deliveries by rail and truck routes, resulting in a severely depleted supply of food and goods. Badly needed pharmaceuticals are also in short supply. (Weyn, 2010, p. 143)

The characters face a range of vulnerabilities, including food and medicine shortages, communication disruptions, and evacuation challenges. The situation is similarly pathetic in the other American town, Marietta, where "There's no gasoline. No food. Nothing!" (Weyn, 2010, p. 121) What is even more alarming is that this unprecedented crisis caused by the scarcity of daily survival needs culminates in an act of civil unrest:

> In one of the most shocking displays of violence, close to approximately fifty citizens of Marietta township descended on the semirural town of Sage Valley–many of them on foot due to the current ongoing gas shortage–in search of much-needed food, medicine, and other goods that have been unavailable in Marietta since the hurricane struck. (Weyn, 2010, p. 178)

In the novel, there is a convergence of catastrophes: first of all, the oil crisis which paralyses the normal flow of life in America; secondly, the multiscalar violence that makes the people nonplussed; and thirdly, the ecodisaster, OscPearl, which finally leads to an existential crisis. However, there are more impending disasters for the American people as the climatologists warn that the reckless consumption of fossil fuel can "produce more powerful hurricanes" (Weyn, 2010, p. 99) in the nearer future. Therefore, "a fundamental shift in patterns of energy use" (Niblett, 2017, p. 136) is now necessary that will pave the path towards energy transition.

Energy Transition and the Quest for a Sustainable Future

The excessive dependency on oil-powered energy, which facilitated our modern way of life for a long period, now proves to be a menace for us. Indeed, we cannot live without the engines and machines that have hitherto served us. But the unrelenting extraction and reckless consumption of crude oil around the world have led us to the point that global oil reserves are "nearly empty." (Weyn, 2010, p. 34) This forces us to reimagine a future without oil where alternative source(s) of energy will pacify our requirements. The importance of Weyn's *Empty* as a specimen of energy literature is that it advocates for a transition from fossil fuels to renewable resources for a sustainable future. The novel shows how the unbridled pursuit of petro-dollars of the multinational oil companies and our desire for the "thrill of acceleration" (Wenzel, 2014, p. 156) have exhausted our oil reserves. The idea of "peak oil" becomes relevant in this respect as scientists speculate that either we have "already reached or are about to reach" the maximum petroleum "production capacity worldwide" and that it "will diminish significantly in volume by the middle of the century." (O'Leary, 2025) Weyn' *Empty* is set in an immediate future when the entire human civilisation has just run out of fuel. Due to the scarcity of gasoline, the supermarkets are empty and schools, offices and shopping malls are shut down. In the novel, we find a depiction of a horrible situation where all fossil-energy

powered engines have stopped working:

> There were no engine sounds. No air conditioners hummed. No TV or music blared. The high, ubiquitous whine of electricity on the wire that usually buzzed just below the level of consciousness was missing. Normally cars would have been on the road, but tonight she couldn't hear any pass. Was everyone conserving what gas they had left? (Weyn, 2010, p. 26)

Gwen's observation of the "deep silence" (Weyn, 2010, p. 26) sitting on the roof of her house leads us to a significant question whether it is sufficient to save fossil fuels for our future use or we need to do something more? Indeed, this seems to be a rhetorical question the answer to which is now well known to us. Saving fossil fuels alone will not serve the purpose because it may slow down the depletion process but it cannot stop the ultimate exhaustion. We cannot simply stay back and wait for the day to come when oil will eventually run out. So, what we need to do is, first, "grasp the full intricacies of our imbrication with energy systems" (fossil fuels in particular), and second, "map out other ways of being, behaving, and belonging in relation to both old and new forms of energy." (Szeman & Boyer, 2017, p. 3) But the stupendous task before us is to decide what will be the new modes of energy that will save us.

Recently, we have seen the dominance of lithium battery powered electric cars worldwide, especially in the U.S. But sill there is substantial doubt that such lithium powered vehicles can be a viable alternative to oil-powered cars due to the fact that like petroleum, lithium too, is a non-renewable resource. In fact, in the novel, there is a significant discussion on lithium as an alternative resource to petroleum when Bolivia, "the world's greatest supplier of the valuable mineral lithium" (Weyn, 2010, p. 32), decides to support Venezuela in the oil-war against the U.S. by backing out of lithium trade talks with the U.S. There is no surprise that when the vast "lithium fields of Bolivia" were discovered, everyone thought that this valuable mineral would be an adequate substitute of oil and it would "lead us to the post-petroleum era." (Weyn, 2010, p. 32) As a result, a "renewed interest in hybrid vehicle development" (p. 32) grew in the U.S. market based on lithium powered batteries. In fact, as "oil grows ever scarcer, the use of battery-powered cars and generators is seen as increasingly crucial." (p. 32) In the novel, when Tom Harris was struggling with his father's old oil-powered pickup truck, his friend Carlos asked him, "Why not turn this in for a hybrid or an electric?" (p. 6) Tom did not have the money to buy a new electric car and he also knew that the upgradation of the truck into a hybrid one would be expensive. But he admits that the way in which the price of gasoline "is getting higher every day" the expense "might be worth it." (p. 7) But the problem with lithium is discussed in the novel through Tom's conversation with his teacher Mr. Curtin. He tells Tom that the lithium is what they need at the moment if they're "going to be using more and more lithium batteries", but the bitter truth they must remember is that "lithium will run out eventually, too." (p. 42) Thus, it is very clear that non-renewable alternatives like lithium cannot be our saviours.

At this critical stage, the role of renewable energy resources becomes highly crucial. Weyn's *Empty*, in many ways, emphasizes the importance of renewable resources for a sustainable planet. In the novel, Senator Thomas Rambling, who opposes the American oil-wars against Venezuela, argues that we need to "get it through our heads that oil is a nonrenewable resource" (Weyn, 2010, pp. 164-165) and we must not fight for something "that does not even exist anymore." (p. 66) Instead, he proposes that the future lies in alternative energy resources like "wind, solar, hydrogen, and other renewable sources like corn oil, magnetism, and the like" (p. 165) that have negligible harmful effects. Again, in the novel, the "Whippersnapper 3", which is a "Green Model Home", where Gwen took shelter during the super hurricane, acts as a powerful symbol of alternative energy future (p. 115). It is based on

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an advanced magnetic generator designed by an "Australian inventor" which can produce "up to twenty-four kilowatts of power per day." (p. 115) Although it requires an "initial kick start from battery power", this generator "utilizes magnetic attraction and repulsion to produce five times more power than it consumes." (p. 115) Weyn suggests that "this home is a completely self-sustaining answer to many of the fuel emergencies bound to face the planet in coming years." (p. 115) Thus, the novel through its various references to alternative energy resources tries to bring home the opinion that transition to sustainable energy resources is the need of the hour and we all must actively contribute to it and "be the part of the solution, not part of the problem." (p. 115)

Conclusion

Weyn's *Empty* offers a powerful criticism of the destructive extraction of crude petroleum as a result of petro-capitalist extractivism. It shows how the overconsumption of fossil fuels leads to not only energy crisis but also global warming which produces ecodisasters like super hurricane and flood. The novel, through the portrayal of the havoc caused by the super hurricane, OscPearl, and the consequent existential crisis of the people of the American towns, warns us against the dangers of our present unsustainable engagement with fossil fuels. The novel suggests that though no single renewable energy source can fully replace oil, we must make a wholehearted effort to develop every possible alternative. Therefore, instead of fighting to regain our old way of life which pollutes the planet by raising carbon level in the atmosphere, we must search for cleaner alternatives. The novel proposes that a world which is not a "pit of greed and overconsumption" is "really possible after all." (Weyn, 2010, p. 183) The novel ends on an optimistic note by referring to renewable energy resources as the only possible solution, suggesting the possibility for a new life and regeneration. It compels us not only to think that at every passing moment we are getting late for our redeeming energy transition but also to act accordingly. It also urges for a revaluation of the pivotal role played by such petro-narratives within the domain of energy-literature in signifying that the world, run by dwindling fossil energy is going to be replaced by a new one based on sustainable energy resources. In other words, the novel advocates for a sustainable energy future founded on responsible consumption and renewable energy.

Endnotes:

1. Gasoline is a form of processed petroleum that is primarily used as fuel in motor vehicles like cars, motorcycles, buses and trucks.
2. Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha in their work *Ecology and Equity: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India* (1995) have coined the term "ecosystem people" to describe the poor communities whose subsistence is drastically affected by capitalist natural resource exploitation.

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