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## Porous Media Applied to Pebble Bed Modular Reactor Thermal-hydraulics

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# Porous Media Applied to Pebble Bed Modular Reactor Thermal-hydraulics

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**Abstract** – Among the SMRs (Small and Medium sized Reactors) for electricity generation currently under development we find the PBMRs (Pebble Bed Modular Reactors). These nuclear reactors work at very high temperature and are cooled generally by helium flowing through spherical fuel pebbles. In this work we focus on the thermal hydraulic differences when using air or helium as a cooling fluid. The porous media model can be used for PBMR thermal-hydraulic studies. A mathematical model is developed thanks to the conservation equation of mass, momentum and energy. The model is made for a two-dimensional permanent flow regime in an annular cylindrical geometry filled with a porous media saturated by a single fluid phase. The convective heat transfer is evaluated for different ratios of internal and external radius and for different Biot numbers, for both air and helium. The results show that helium still the best cooling fluid. Air can ensure the transfer of less than 40% of the heat generated in the nuclear reactor core. In some particular situations: as cooling accidents or when removing the residual heat, air can then play a significant role.

**Keywords:** porous media, core thermal-hydraulics, nuclear reactor, PBMR, behavior, cooling.

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## I. Introduction

Pebble Bed Modular Reactors (PBMRs), are high temperature thermal reactors of 6.2 m diameter and 27 m height as described by Nam Zin Cho (2008) [1]. These reactors use uranium spheres as fuel and helium as coolant. The spheres are covered with carbon layers ensuring the thermal moderation of neutrons. In the PBMR concept, the core having a cylindrical similarity is filled with a random pebble bed of spheres. The helium used as primary coolant is flowing downwardly at high pressure to remove the heat generated in the PBMR's core. The coupled thermal hydraulic phenomena occurring in steady state bed nuclear reactor core, were analyzed by developing mathematical models, one can cite Kaviany (1995)[2], Becker and Laurien (2003)[3], Stroh et al. (1979-a) [4], Stroh et al. (1979-b) [5]. And then later, results obtained by mathematical models developed to analyze the coupled thermal hydraulic problems were compared to experimental values measured on full scale loop as done by Stroh et al. (1979-b) [5]. It has been shown limitations and ability to thus mathematical models to adequately calculate flow distribution. This study deals with the cooling of PBMR's core when using helium or air as cooling fluid. Therefore it is important to identify the thermal hydraulic transfer phenomena in the PBMR's core. It shows a wide spread dispersion on heat flux data in natural convection, between experimental data and data obtained by analytical solutions as reported by Vadasz (2010)[6]. Thus

the stability of mixed convection in a vertical porous medium is shown to be greatly, in the cases of gases, destabilized by inertia and drag forces, Kumar et al. (2010)[7]. The thermal non-equilibrium model has been used also to perform numerical investigation of effects of several parameters on enhancement or retardation of heat transfer rate in vertical cylinder filled with saturated porous medium by Salman et al. (2011) [8]. The PBMR's core is a vertical annular cylinder as shown in figure (1), having inner and outer radius denoted  $r_i$  and  $r_e$ , and a height  $H$ . This cylinder is filled with a porous medium saturated with a single fluid phase and the solid phase consist of fuel spheres of 6 cm diameter. The arrangement of spheres in the annular part of the nuclear reactor core can make the theory of porous media possible and then the thermal hydraulic calculations. As the porous media theory is considered, Darcy's law will be used. Some CFD results show that air can be used as a cooling fluid among some other gases as shown by Sidi Ali and Meftah (2010)[9]. Also recently it has been seen a growing interest to write equations representing flow misdistribution in pebble bed as done by Becker and Laurien (2003) [3] and also by Stroh et al. (1979-a) [4]. In fact the geometric characteristics have a great influence on coupled thermal hydraulic issues. The performed simulation results show a significant impact on the temperature distribution and the maximum temperature when an eccentric misplaced package takes place in the reactor core as mentioned by Kadak and Bazant (2004) [10]. One is interested, in this work, to the evaluation of the capacity of cooling of air and of helium.

A wide serie of flow visualization experiments were conducted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to explore major issues of flow in pebble bed reactors,

Kadak and Bazant (2004) [10]. The main data obtained globally agree with the PBMR Safety Analysis Report when the flow is laminar, but appear disagree otherwise.

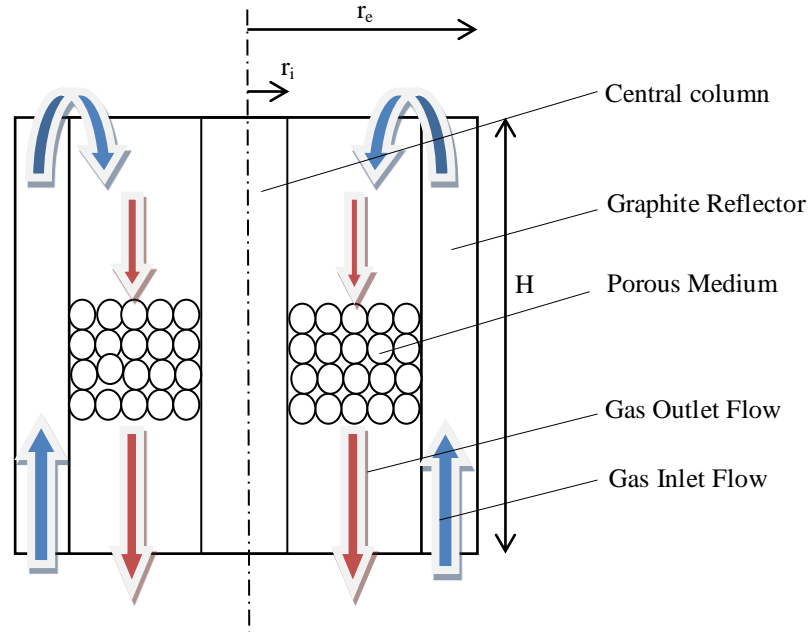


Figure 1 Thermal hydraulic configuration studied

## II. Governing Equations

In this work, heat transfer by convection is evaluated for a two dimensional laminar flow in a reactive porous medium. The Darcy model is applied to a homogeneous and isotropic porous medium through which a gas flows at low velocity. The simplifying assumptions to establish the mathematical model are:

- fluid is incompressible and the flow is laminar and stationary.
- thermal equilibrium between the two phases (fluid/solid).
- viscous dissipation negligible.
- thermal conductivity of spheres is constant

Equations governing the flow are the conservation equation of mass, of momentum and of energy, as presented here after in Cartesian coordinates.

$$\nabla \cdot V = 0 \quad (1)$$

$$V = \frac{-K}{\mu} (\nabla p + \rho g) \quad (2)$$

$$V \cdot \nabla T = \alpha \nabla^2 T \quad (3)$$

Where :  $V$  is the fluid velocity,  $K$  the porosity of the medium,  $\mu$  the viscosity,  $p$  the pressure,  $\rho$  the density,  $g$  the gravity,  $\alpha$  the thermal diffusivity and  $T$  the temperature.

In cylindrical coordinates, the equations of continuity, momentum and energy are written as follows:

- for continuity:

$$\frac{1}{r} \frac{\partial(u r)}{\partial r} + \frac{\partial w}{\partial z} = 0 \quad (4)$$

- for momentum:

$$u = -\frac{k}{\mu} \left( \frac{\partial p}{\partial r} \right), w = -\frac{k}{\mu} \left( \frac{\partial p}{\partial z} + \rho g \right) \quad (5)$$

- for energy:

$$(\rho C_p)_f \left( u \frac{\partial T}{\partial r} + w \frac{\partial T}{\partial z} \right) = \frac{\lambda^*}{r} \frac{\partial}{\partial r} \left( r \frac{\partial T}{\partial r} \right) + \frac{\partial}{\partial z} \left( \lambda^* \frac{\partial T}{\partial z} \right) \quad (6)$$

where:  $u$  and  $w$  are the velocity components,  $r$  the radius,  $z$  the height,  $C_p$  the specific heat of fluid and  $\lambda^*$  the conductivity of the medium at thermal equilibrium.

By introducing the dimensionless variables as proposed by Greenberg (2001)[11]:

$$\begin{aligned} \hat{u} &= \frac{u}{\alpha/r_e}, & \hat{w} &= \frac{w}{\alpha/r_e}, & \hat{P} &= \frac{P}{\alpha\mu/K} + \frac{\rho_e g z}{\alpha\mu/K}, \\ \theta &= \frac{T-T_e}{T_i-T_e}, & \hat{z} &= \frac{z}{r_e}, & \hat{r} &= \frac{r}{r_e} \end{aligned}$$

in the equations of continuity, momentum and energy, one obtains the dimensionless forms as given in equations (7,8 and 9).

- equation of continuity:

$$\frac{\partial(\dot{u} \dot{r})}{\partial \dot{r}} + \dot{r} \frac{\partial \dot{w}}{\partial \dot{z}} = 0 \quad (7)$$

- equation of motion:

$$\frac{\partial \dot{u}}{\partial \dot{z}} - \frac{\partial \dot{w}}{\partial \dot{r}} = -R_a \frac{\partial \theta}{\partial \dot{r}} \quad (8)$$

Where  $\dot{u}$  and  $\dot{w}$  are the dimensionless forms of the flow velocity components,  $\dot{r}$  and  $\dot{z}$  the dimensionless form of the spatial flow coordinates,  $\theta$  the dimensionless form of the medium temperature and  $R_a$  the modified Rayleigh number given by:  $R_a = \frac{kr_e g \rho_e \beta \Delta T}{\alpha \mu}$ , where  $\beta$  is the expansion coefficient

- equation of energy:

$$\left( \dot{u} \frac{\partial \theta}{\partial \dot{r}} + \dot{w} \frac{\partial \theta}{\partial \dot{z}} \right) = \left[ \frac{1}{\dot{r}} \left( \frac{\partial \theta}{\partial \dot{r}} \right) + \frac{\partial^2 \theta}{\partial \dot{r}^2} + \left( \frac{\partial^2 \theta}{\partial \dot{z}^2} \right) \right] \quad (9)$$

One defines the radius ratio by:  $\eta = \frac{r_i}{r_e}$  and the ratio of the height and the external radius by:  $A = \frac{H}{r_e}$ , and the boundary conditions are:

At the internal wall of the core:

$$\dot{r} = \eta \Rightarrow \theta = 1 \quad (10)$$

At the external wall of the core:

$$\dot{r} = 1 \Rightarrow \frac{\partial \theta}{\partial \dot{r}} = -Bi \theta \quad (11)$$

$$\text{At the core entry: } \dot{z} = A \Rightarrow \frac{\partial \theta}{\partial \dot{z}} = 0 \quad (12)$$

$$\text{At the core exit: } \dot{z} = 0 \Rightarrow \frac{\partial \theta}{\partial \dot{z}} = 0 \quad (13)$$

To solve the problem, one introduces the stream function by writing :

$$\begin{cases} \dot{u} = \frac{1}{\dot{r}} \frac{\partial \psi}{\partial \dot{z}} \\ \dot{w} = -\frac{1}{\dot{r}} \frac{\partial \psi}{\partial \dot{r}} \end{cases} \quad (14)$$

And the boundary conditions are:

$$\begin{cases} \psi(\eta, z) = 0 \\ \psi(1, z) = 0 \\ \theta(\eta, z) = 0 \\ \theta(1, z) = \frac{-1}{Bi} \frac{\partial \theta}{\partial \dot{r}} \end{cases} \quad (15)$$

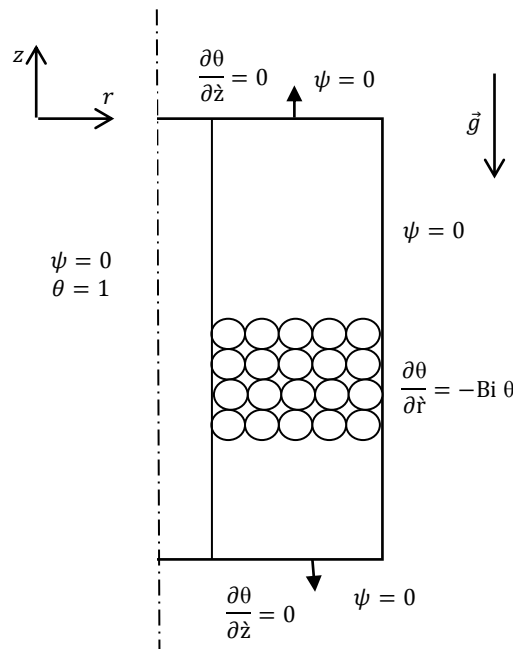


Figure 2. Boundary conditions of the problem

A solution, as proposed by Havstad and Burns (1982) [12], is given by:

$$\psi = \frac{Ra_m Bi_i \dot{r}^2}{2(1-Bi_i \ln \eta)} \left[ \ln r - \frac{1}{2} \right] + C_1 \frac{r^2}{2} + D_1 \quad (16)$$

where:  $C_1 = \frac{Ra_i Bi_i}{1-Bi_i \ln \eta} \frac{\eta^2 \ln \eta - \frac{\eta^2+1}{2}}{\eta^2-1}$

and  $D_1 = -\frac{Ra_i Bi_i}{2(1-Bi_i \ln \eta)} \left[ \frac{1}{2} + \frac{\eta^2 \ln \eta - \frac{\eta^2+1}{2}}{\eta^2-1} \right]$   
 $\theta = \frac{1}{1-Bi_i \ln \eta} (-Bi_i \ln \dot{r} + 1) \quad (17)$

and one gets:

$$\dot{w} = \frac{Ra_i Bi_i \ln \dot{r}}{1-Bi_i \ln \eta} - C_1 \quad (18)$$

where  $\frac{h r_0}{\lambda}$  is the Biot number.

The convective heat flux is calculated using:

$$\varphi_{cv} = \gamma \int_{\eta}^1 \dot{w} \theta 2\pi \dot{r} d\dot{r} \quad (19)$$

Where  $\gamma = 0.57$  is a proportionality constant.

Injecting (17) and (18) in (19) and integrating, one gets the final form of convective heat flux:

$$Q_{cv} = \frac{2\gamma Ra_i Bi_i \pi}{(1-Bi_i \ln \eta)^2} \left[ \frac{2(\eta^2 \ln \eta - \frac{\eta^2+1}{2})}{(\eta^2-1)} (1 + Bi_i - \eta^2 + Bi_i \eta^3 \ln \eta - Bi_i \eta^3) - Bi_i + \frac{1}{2} + Bi_i \eta^3 - \eta^3 \ln \eta + \frac{\eta^3 \ln \eta}{2} - \frac{\eta^3}{2} \right] \quad (20)$$

### III. Application, Results and Interpretation

An application is done for a PBMR; some of its characteristics are presented in table 1.

table 1 PBMR characteristics

Parameter	Identity
Generated power	400 MW
fluid inlet temperature	400 °C
fluid outlet temperature	800°C
Pressure of the system	9 MPa
PBMR core outside diameter	3.7 m
PBMR core inside diameter	2.0 m
Fuel spheres number	450000
Fuel sphere diameter	0.06 m
Enrobing fuel material	Carbon

The results are presented in figures (3, 4 and 5). In these figures, one presents the variations of the convective heat evacuated during cooling in normal situation when using

helium as a coolant fluid and in the second case when air is used as a coolant fluid. A comparison between these two cooling cases is also presented.

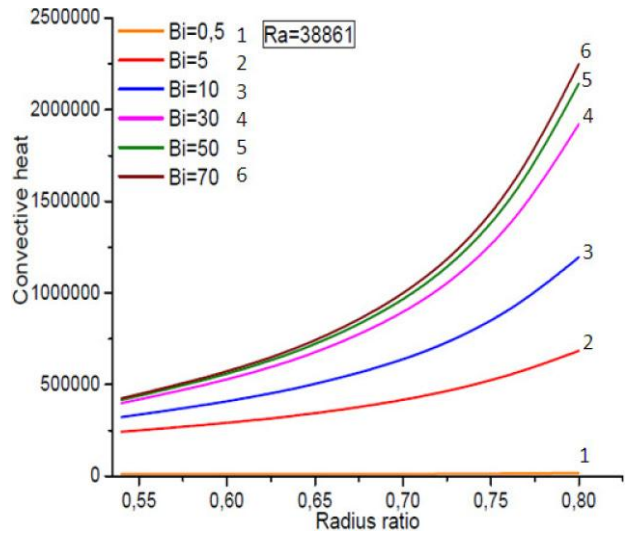


Figure 3. Variations of convective heat for different Biot numbers according to the radius ratio for a Ra (helium) =38861, Alem (2011) [13]

In figure.3, is presented the convective heat flux variations when using helium as a coolant according to the radius ratio between 0 and 0.8, and for Biot numbers between 0.5 and 70. The Rayleigh number is maintained constant and equal to 38861. One sees that for each value of the Biot number, the convective heat is almost identical for low values of the radius (below 0.3). Then the convective heat increases according to the radius ratio and reaches maximum values. For large values of Biot number, one observes that convective heat variations are the same according to Alem (2011) [13].

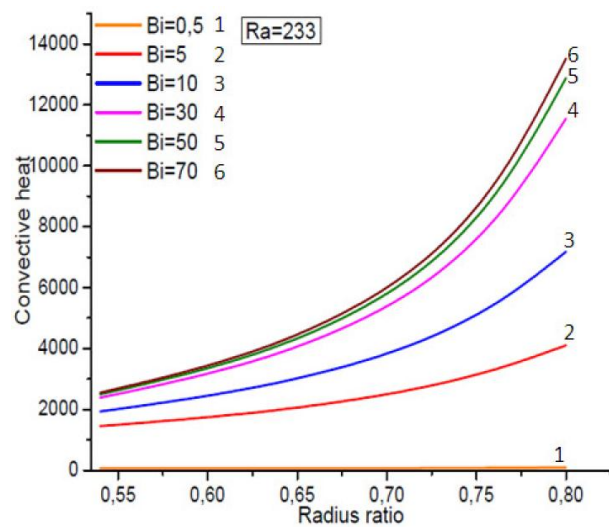


Figure 4. Variations of convective heat for different Biot numbers according to the radius ratio for a Ra (air) =233

In figure.4 is presented the convective heat flux when air is used as a coolant according to the radius ratio  $r$  between 0 and 0.8 and for Biot number values between 0 and 0.8 and for Biot number values between 0.5 and 70. One sees that for low variation of radius ratio, the convective heat flux is almost the same; it varies between 0 and 3000 and then increases according to  $r$ . For a low Biot number equal to 0.5, the convective heat flux is low and varies between 0 and 200. For large values of Biot number, the convective heat flux becomes important; we find that the convective heat variations are the same according to the radius ratio for large Biot number values.

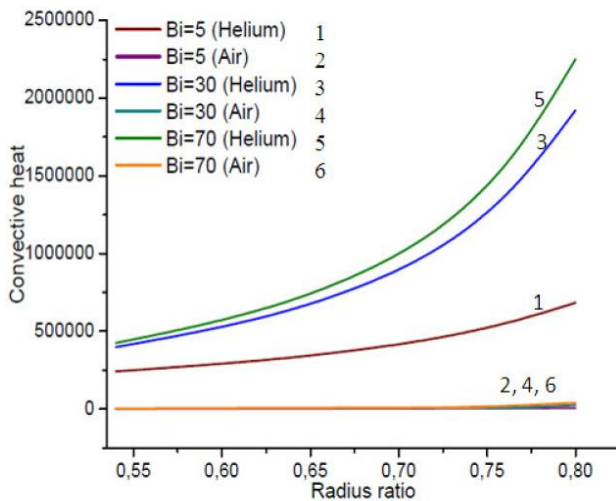


Figure 5. Comparison of the convective heat variations when using helium or air for Biot = 5, 30, 70

In figure.5, is presented a comparison between convective heat variations when using helium or when using air as a coolant according to the radius ratio for Biot numbers equal to 5, 30 and 70. We see that the heat removed when using helium as a coolant is greater than the one removed when using air for the three Biot values. It is also observed that for the three Biot numbers, the heat removed by air is very low, compared to the one removed by helium, as shown on the figure.4.

#### IV. Conclusions

The coupled thermal hydraulic issues for pebble bed core reactor are in growing interest. Many works deal with numerical modeling and a lot of experiments have been achieved, on porous medium. Here in, the attempting is to model the pebble bed core reactor and estimate temperature and heat transfer when using helium or air as coolant. Both normal operating and shutdown cases are considered. The application of the porous media theory to study the thermal-hydraulic behavior of a Pebble Bed Modular Reactor gives good analytical results. First the effect of geometry (radius ratio) is significant regarding to the amount of heat transfer. Comparison of the convective heat transfers

when using air and when using helium shows big differences mainly when the convection is forced. This is due to the thermo physical properties of the gases. One evaluates the ability of air to transfer heat by the order of 30 % to 40 % of the transfer capacity if helium is used. But in some particular situations: as cooling accidents or when removing the residual heat after shut down, air can take place instead of helium.

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