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# Intertextual infrastructures of modern Arabic fiction: A comparative reading of Naguib Mahfouz's Midaq Alley and ʿAbd al-Rahman Munif's cities of salt

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## ABSTRACT

This article offers a comparative reading of intertextuality (tanāṣṣ) in the modern Arabic novel through Naguib Mahfouz's Midaq Alley and ʿAbd al-Rahman Munif's Cities of Salt. Rather than treating intertextuality as occasional quotation, it approaches it as an organizing principle that structures narrative authority, ethical evaluation, and historical imagination. The theoretical frame combines Arabic critical antecedents (sirqa, iqtibās, taḍmīn, muʿāraḍa) with modern formulations by Bakhtin, Kristeva, and Genette, and it operationalizes intertextuality as a spectrum that includes overt citation, allusive echo, generic inheritance, and discursive borrowing.

In Mahfouz, the alley is narrated as an urban palimpsest where Qurʾanic ethical idiom, classical adab, popular storytelling, and the conventions of social realism overlap. These layered voices do not ornament the narrative; they regulate what can be said about desire, respectability, and social mobility, and they turn the alley into a site where competing moral languages collide. In Munif, intertextuality becomes a counter-archival method: oral poetry, local memory, and religious imagery are set against bureaucratic and corporate registers that accompany oil extraction, producing a polyphonic critique of petro-modernity.

By placing the two novels side by side, the article argues that intertextuality functions as moral infrastructure in Mahfouz and as political counter-infrastructure in Munif. The conclusion proposes "intertextual infrastructure" as a comparative concept for Arabic fiction across Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula, and it outlines a method for mapping intertextual environments beyond influence-hunting.

**KEYWORDS:** Intertextuality (tanāṣṣ), transtextuality; modern Arabic novel, Naguib Mahfouz, ʿAbd al-Rahman Munif; realism, petrofiction, discourse, comparative literature

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**1. Introduction**

Modern Arabic fiction is frequently discussed through the master narratives of realism, modernism, and the nation-state: the novel as a vehicle for social representation, a laboratory for new subjectivities, or a forum for imagining political community. These accounts are valuable, yet they often carry an implicit assumption that the novel is a self-contained object that begins with an author and ends with a plot. In practice, the modern Arabic novel is rarely single-voiced. It speaks through a crowded archive: sacred diction, classical adab, oral storytelling, administrative language, newspaper idioms, and the inherited conventions of the European novel that entered Arabic through translation and literary debate. When these languages meet inside one narrative, the result is not simply stylistic variety. It is a struggle over what counts as truth, what counts as value, and what kind of future can be narrated without collapsing into propaganda or nostalgia (Allen 1995; Badawi 1992; Kilpatrick 1992; Hafez 1993; Jayyusi 1992; Atiyeh and Oweiss 2000; Armbrust 1996; al-Musawi 2003).

This study argues that intertextuality (tanāṣṣ) is best approached as infrastructure. By "intertextual infrastructure," I mean the background system of textual and discursive relations that makes certain narrative moves persuasive, certain moral judgments intelligible, and certain historical claims plausible. When a narrator activates a Qurʾanic cadence, borrows an adab formula, or adapts a realist convention learned from translated fiction, the text recruits an entire repertoire of expectations. Intertextuality, in this sense, is a form of cultural memory operating at the level of syntax, metaphor, genre, and voice. It allows a novel to argue without turning into a treatise: a brief echo can authorize an ethical verdict, destabilize an official narrative, or reframe a character's desire as a symptom of a larger social grammar (Kristeva 1980; Bakhtin 1981; Genette 1997a; Genette 1997b; Eco 1979; Culler 1975; Riffaterre 1978).

The argument is developed through a comparative reading of two canonical works that emerge from different regional and historical conditions yet share a preoccupation with the social costs of modernity: Naguib Mahfouz's Midaq Alley (Zuqāq al-Midaq) and ʿAbd al-Rahman Munif's Cities of Salt (Mudun al-Milh, with primary focus on the opening volume, al-Tīh / The Desert). Mahfouz, writing from mid-twentieth-century Cairo, builds an intensely localized urban microcosm. The alley is a social organism whose rituals of reputation, surveillance, gossip, and aspiration reveal how a whole moral economy functions under scarcity and colonial modernity. Munif, writing about the Arabian Peninsula's oil encounter, narrates the violent reorganization of space, labor, and language as companies and state structures reshape the desert into an extractive economy. Both novels stage transformation, but they do so by letting multiple textual worlds collide inside the narrative (Mahfouz 1947; Mahfouz 1992; Munif 1984; Munif 1989; Somekh 1973; El-Enany 1993; Moosa 1994; Mehrez 1994; Mitchell 2011; Ghosh 1992; LeMenager 2014; Szeman and Boyer 2017; Macdonald 2017).

A comparative method is essential for two reasons. First, it prevents intertextuality from being reduced to influence hunting, where the critic's task becomes an inventory of sources. Comparison shifts emphasis from identifying what was borrowed to explaining what a borrowing does in a given environment. Second, it places Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula within the same analytic frame without flattening their differences. Mahfouz and Munif are often studied in separate subfields—Cairo realism on one side, Gulf petrofiction on the other. Reading them together foregrounds how intertextuality travels across regional ecologies and how similar intertextual resources can be used to produce different ethical and political effects (Wellek and Warren 1949; Culler 1975; Todorov 1977).

The study has four aims. The first is conceptual: to clarify intertextuality by placing Western theory in dialogue with Arabic critical antecedents, and by recognizing that Arabic criticism has long debated textual borrowing under names such as sirqa (poetic theft), iqtibās (citation), taḍmīn (insertion), and muʿāraḍa (creative opposition). The second is methodological: to propose a practical framework for tracing intertextual relations that includes overt citation, allusive echo, generic inheritance, and discursive borrowing. The third is interpretive: to apply this framework to close readings of Midaq Alley and Cities of Salt, showing how intertextuality structures character formation, spatial imagination, and the narration of legitimacy. The fourth is comparative: to articulate what becomes visible only when the two novels are read side by side, especially the contrast between intertextuality as moral infrastructure in Mahfouz and intertextuality as counter-archive in Munif (al-Askari 1981; Ibn Rashiq al-Qayrawani 2002; al-Jurjani 1991a; al-Jurjani 1991b; al-Fadl 1992; Yaqtin 1997; al-Ghadhami 1997; al-Jahiz 1998).

These aims are pursued through three guiding research questions. First, what kinds of intertexts—sacred,

classical, popular, bureaucratic, translated—do Mahfouz and Munif activate, and by what narrative techniques do they activate them? Second, how does intertextuality function as argument in each novel, and what ethical or political claims become possible through particular intertextual registers? Third, what does comparison reveal about the relationship between intertextuality and modernity in two different Arabic literary ecologies: Cairo's urban-national horizon and the Arabian Peninsula's petro-modern horizon?

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 sketches a conceptual genealogy of intertextuality, beginning with Arabic discussions of borrowing and shared meanings and moving through the influential formulations of Saussure, Bakhtin, Kristeva, Barthes, and Genette. Section 3 specifies the method and corpus, and it defines the operational categories used in the analysis. Sections 4 and 5 offer close readings of Mahfouz and Munif, foregrounding the intertextual mechanics that structure their ethical and political claims. Section 6 draws out comparative implications and proposes "intertextual infrastructure" as a heuristic for future comparative studies in Arabic fiction (Saussure 1959; Bakhtin 1981; Kristeva 1980; Barthes 1977; Genette 1980; Genette 1997a; Genette 1997b).

**2. Conceptual Genealogy: From Arabic Naqd to Intertextual Theory**

Any discussion of intertextuality in Arabic literature must confront a double risk. The first is theoretical inflation: if every relation between texts is "intertextual," the term becomes a synonym for reading itself. The second is theoretical amnesia: importing a modern European term without attending to older Arabic vocabularies of textual interaction. A useful starting point is to treat intertextuality as a name for an old problem rather than a completely new phenomenon. Writers have always reused, revised, and competed with earlier language. What changes in modern theory is not the presence of borrowing, but the way borrowing is interpreted: from moral accusation (theft) to productive transformation (dialogue) (Eagleton 1996; Eco 1979).

Arabic criticism provides a rich prehistory of this shift. Classical discussions of poetic "theft" (sirqa) rarely reduce authorship to mere plagiarism. Ibn Rashiq's well-known gradations, for example, differentiate between blunt copying and forms of reworking in which the later poet improves, intensifies, or re-contextualizes what came before. Even when the vocabulary is accusatory, the analysis implicitly recognizes that literary value is created through relations between texts. Al-Jahiz pushes this recognition further by insisting that "meanings" are widely shared, and that distinction lies in the shaping of expression, the ease of diction, and the quality of composition. In other words, what circulates is not only content but also style, register, and rhetorical strategy. Abu Hilal al-ʿAskari similarly treats shared meanings as common property while differentiating between crude appropriation and skillful re-formation. Read together, these positions anticipate a key claim of modern intertextuality: novelty often consists in the reconfiguration of what is already available (Ibn Rashiq al-Qayrawani 2002; al-Askari 1981).

Modern Arabic criticism has also preserved a set of terms that describe specific kinds of textual relation. Iqtibās names citation or borrowing from authoritative texts (especially the Qurʾan), taḍmīn refers to insertion and embedding, and muʿāraḍa names creative opposition in which a later poet or writer composes "against" an earlier template. These terms matter because they keep the critic close to technique. Rather than treating "intertextuality" as an abstract umbrella, one can ask: is the relation a direct citation, an echo without attribution, a generic imitation, or a polemical rewrite? The Arabic teaching handout on tanāṣṣ that accompanies this project stresses a similar point when it warns that the term may collapse into a vague label unless it is operationalized by levels and mechanisms of textual interaction (al-Fadl 1992; Yaqtin 1997; al-Ghadhami 1997).

Western theoretical debates reframe the same questions under different assumptions. Structural linguistics, associated with Saussure, offers one decisive displacement: meaning is not a property of things in the world but a property of relations within a system of signs. When this insight is applied to literature, the text appears less as a window onto reality and more as a node within a network of prior discourse. Bakhtin radicalizes the implication by arguing that language is inherently dialogic: every utterance is shaped by prior utterances and anticipates future responses. A novel, on this view, is not a homogeneous voice but a space in which social languages collide. This collision is not merely thematic; it is formal. Different registers, accents, and evaluative tones struggle for narrative authority inside the same work (Saussure 1959; Culler 1975).

Kristeva's coinage of "intertextuality" translates Bakhtin's dialogism into a wider semiotic claim: any text is an intersection of other texts, a mosaic of quotations. This formulation is often repeated but rarely

disciplined. Its value lies in shifting the unit of analysis from the author to the text's operations. Intertextuality is not "what the author read" but what the text makes available as relations—sometimes consciously, sometimes through the pressure of shared discourse. Barthes pushes this logic to its extreme by relocating meaning from authorial origin to textual tissue and to the activity of reading. The author is not the source but a position within language; the text becomes a fabric woven from citations, codes, and cultural debris (Kristeva 1980; Kristeva 1984; Bakhtin 1981; Barthes 1977; Riffaterre 1978).

Genette provides a crucial methodological stabilization. Rather than letting intertextuality name every relation, he offers a typology of transtextuality: intertextuality in the narrow sense (quotation, plagiarism, allusion), paratext (titles, prefaces, epigraphs), metatext (commentary), hypertextuality (transformation of an earlier text), and architextuality (generic affiliation). For literary analysis, Genette's categories are valuable because they distinguish mechanisms and sites. A title may already stage an intertextual claim; a genre may quietly discipline what counts as plausible. This typology makes it possible to talk about intertextuality as a set of structured practices rather than an atmosphere (Genette 1997a; Genette 1997b; Genette 1980).

The Arabic handout cited above adds another useful distinction by emphasizing degrees of transformation. It summarizes a triad attributed to Kristeva in later reception: "repetition" (a weak level of direct insertion), "absorption" (reusing meaning while reshaping expression), and "transformation" (the highest level, where the source is reworked so deeply that a hurried reader may not notice the earlier trace). Whatever one thinks of this triad historically, it is analytically productive. It invites the critic to ask not only whether an intertext exists but what kind of labor it performs: does the later text simply borrow authority, or does it convert the borrowed material into a new argument (Handout n.d.; Kristeva 1980; Hutcheon 1985; Bloom 1973)?

In this article, intertextuality will therefore be used in a limited but flexible sense. It refers to a text's patterned activation of earlier discourse for the purpose of producing meaning in the present. That activation can be overt (through quotation and epigraph), semi-overt (through recognizable allusion), or structural (through genre, narrative templates, and institutional registers). The point is not to prove that one novelist "influenced" another, but to map how each novel builds credibility by arranging voices that precede it. With this working definition, the next step is methodological: how can such activations be traced in a way that is rigorous enough to support comparison (Barthes 1972; Derrida 1976; Eco 1979)?

**3. Methodology and Corpus**

This study is qualitative and interpretive. Its primary method is comparative close reading, supported by a limited form of discourse analysis. Comparison here is not an afterthought added to two separate readings; it is an organizing logic. The two novels are treated as answers to a shared question—how to narrate modern transformation—under different material conditions. The task is to describe the intertextual mechanisms by which each novel makes its world legible, and then to explain what becomes visible when those mechanisms are set side by side (Patton 2015; Wellek and Warren 1949; Bal 2009; Chatman 1978).

The corpus is deliberately focused. For Mahfouz, the primary text is Midaq Alley, chosen because it condenses a social world into a bounded space and because its style is an exemplary instance of Arabic realist narration that can still absorb folklore and sacred idiom. For Munif, the primary text is Cities of Salt, treated mainly through the first volume (al-Tīh / The Desert) but with reference to the larger pentalogy when needed, since Munif's critique of oil modernity is distributed across volumes. The comparison therefore does not aim to offer an exhaustive account of either writer's oeuvre; it aims to produce a controlled contrast that clarifies how intertextuality operates under different narrative and historical pressures (Mahfouz 1947; Mahfouz 1992; Munif 1984; Munif 1989; Allen 1995).

Operationally, intertextuality is traced through four categories. (1) Explicit citation: overt quotation, named sources, epigraphs, and highlighted formulas. (2) Allusive echo: recognizable phrases, rhythms, or images that signal another text without naming it. (3) Generic inheritance: the reuse of narrative templates, such as the social panorama of realism, the episodic structure of oral storytelling, or the collective chronicle. (4) Discursive borrowing: the importation of institutional registers—sermonic cadence, legalistic phrasing, bureaucratic report language, or corporate "development" jargon—into literary narration (Genette 1997a; Genette 1997b; Bakhtin 1981; Ong 1982; Thompson 1995).

Analytically, the procedure has three steps. First, the reading identifies sites of density: moments where

a phrase, a ritual, a proverb, or a shift in register changes the scene's moral temperature. Second, it reconstructs the implied intertext—sometimes a scriptural cadence, sometimes a well-known proverb, sometimes a generic convention. Third, it asks what the intertext does: does it authorize a judgment, ironize a character, create nostalgia, or delegitimize an official narrative? The aim is functional description, not a demonstration of hidden sources (Riffaterre 1978; Austin 1962).

A methodological caveat is necessary. Intertextuality is not a stable object that can be measured once and for all; it is a relation activated in reading. Different readers recognize different traces depending on education, religious literacy, and familiarity with genres. For this reason, the analysis foregrounds intertexts that are structurally salient—register shifts, repeated formulas, generic patterns—rather than rare allusions that require specialized detection. Translation is another limitation. Both novels circulate widely in translation, yet many intertextual cues depend on Arabic rhythm, idiom, and register. Where possible, the discussion therefore describes the Arabic mechanism and notes what translation may obscure (Spivak 1993; Eco 1979; Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946; Foucault 1977).

Table 1 summarizes the operational categories used in the analysis and provides examples of how each may appear in prose fiction.

| Category | What to look for in the text | Typical narrative function |
|---|---|---|
| Explicit citation | Quoted phrases, epigraphs, named sources, marked formulas | Authorizes a claim, signals prestige, frames interpretation |
| Allusive echo | Unmarked phraseology or imagery that points to a known scriptural, poetic, or proverbial source | Condenses meaning, activates shared memory, produces irony or reverence |
| Generic inheritance | Narrative templates and expectations (realist panorama, folk tale sequencing, chronicle structure) | Organizes plot and character, positions the work within a literary lineage |
| Discursive borrowing | Institutional registers (sermon, legal contract, bureaucratic report, corporate jargon) | Stages power, legitimizes or delegitimizes authority, naturalizes social hierarchies |

**4. Mahfouz's Midaq Alley: Urban Palimpsest and Moral Speech**

**4.1 Paratext and the alley as chronotope**

Midaq Alley announces its poetics in its title. The alley is not a neutral container; it is a narrative device that concentrates social relations into a space that can be repeatedly traversed. In Genette's terms, the title functions as paratext: it teaches the reader to expect proximity, surveillance, and the circulation of bodies, goods, and stories within a narrow corridor of life. The alley's boundedness is therefore argumentative. It becomes a test case for what modern desire does when it is forced to negotiate a tight grid of reputations (Genette 1997b; Mahfouz 1947; Chatman 1978; Bal 2009).

This spatial concentration also aligns with Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, where time becomes visible through space. The alley keeps past and present in close contact. Craft traditions, religious idiom, and neighborhood habits remain present, even as radio, wage labor, and consumer aspiration press on the scene. Mahfouz does not stage the 'traditional' and the 'modern' as two separate worlds; he stages them as temporalities that coexist inside the same social breath. The result is a narrative of modernity as layering rather than replacement: older registers are not erased, but overwritten and made to show through (Bakhtin 1981; Somekh 1973; Moosa 1994).

**4.2 Sacred echoes and the ethics of everyday life**

One of Mahfouz's most persistent intertextual resources is the ethical idiom associated with Qur'anic and religious language. The novel is not a sermon, yet religious cadence appears in blessings, curses, and everyday invocations that carry moral weight. These echoes establish a shared horizon of value, even when characters fail to live up to it. They also remind the reader that the alley's social judgments are never purely private; they draw authority from inherited speech (Izutsu 1966; Mahfouz 1947; El-Enany 1993).

Sacred echo, however, does not guarantee moral clarity. A familiar cadence may function as aspiration,

accusation, consolation, or irony, depending on who speaks and in what situation. When characters explain misfortune through the language of providence, the narrative can register faith and coping, but it can also expose self-exoneration. Intertextuality thus becomes a way of mapping the gap between moral vocabulary and moral practice (Izutsu 1966; Eliot 1919).

The tension is sharpened in the policing of women's bodies and reputations. Terms of purity, shame, and visibility often carry religious resonance even when they operate as social control. Mahfouz stages this double life of inherited language: it can articulate compassion, but it can also become a tool of surveillance. By refusing to resolve the tension through authorial preaching, the novel turns ethical life into a contest between competing uses of the same tradition (Mehrez 1994; Massad 2007).

**4.3 Adab, folklore, and the micro-texts of urban life**

If sacred language supplies a horizon, adab and folklore supply texture. The alley is full of micro-texts: proverbs, jokes, set phrases, boasts, and formulas of complaint or praise. These portable units circulate across generations, and their authority lies in repetition. A proverb condenses a judgment that can be applied to new situations without fresh argument, so it functions as a social mechanism as much as a rhetorical ornament (Ong 1982; al-Jahiz 1998; Ibn Rashiq al-Qayrawani 2002).

Classical adab operates less as direct quotation than as a model of social observation. The narrator's movement across characters, and his attention to vanity, self-justification, and moral inconsistency, echoes adab's interest in types and dispositions. At the same time, the alley's oral culture produces another intertextual engine: gossip. Gossip is a genre with rules of selection and amplification; it turns fragments into stories, then returns those stories to the alley as reputational facts (al-Jurjani 1991a; al-Jurjani 1991b; al-Askari 1981; Ibn Khaldun 2005).

Folkloric residues also help Mahfouz represent modernity as layered time rather than linear progress. Superstition appears alongside modern medicine; neighborhood solidarity coexists with competitive individualism; religious invocations coexist with consumer aspiration. Intertextuality makes these temporalities audible, because each register implies a different past and a different model of the good life (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Armbrust 1996).

**4.4 Realist inheritance and translation as an intertext**

Mahfouz's intertextual field is not limited to Arabic sources. The novel's realism is itself a generic inheritance shaped by global forms, often mediated through translation and education. Realism arrives as an apparatus of expectation: that society can be narrated through types, causal explanation, and a narrator capable of shifting attention across classes. This does not reduce Midaq Alley to a local copy of European models; it clarifies how the novel's form already participates in a comparative history of the genre (Lukacs 1971; Allen 1995; Badawi 1992; Wellek and Warren 1949).

Realist inheritance also shapes the distribution of sympathy. The narrator's patient attention to marginal figures carries an ethical claim that ordinary lives deserve narrative seriousness. Yet this seriousness is not achieved by stripping the alley of its inherited speech. On the contrary, realism gains plausibility through intertextual density: sacred idiom, proverbial wisdom, and colloquial rhythms function as evidence that the narrated world is socially inhabited (Moosa 1994; Somekh 1973; Mehrez 1994; Beard and Haydar 1993; Abu-Haidar 1995).

**4.5 Intertextuality as moral infrastructure**

Taken together, these layers make the alley function as moral infrastructure. The community's social life depends on shared phrases and recognizable genres, and those forms distribute credibility. To name someone respectable or ruined is to reorganize social possibilities; language performs action because it borrows authority from earlier texts and communal repetition (Austin 1962; Halliday and Hasan 1976; Putnam 2000; Luhmann 1979). This perspective clarifies the ethical logic of Mahfouz's realism. The novel stages moral conflict as conflict between languages: the language of piety, the language of money, the language of romantic aspiration, and the language of communal reputation. Intertextuality is the medium through which these languages enter the narrative and contest each other (Bourdieu 1993; Jameson 1981).

Mahfouz's achievement is that he makes the infrastructure audible. Ethical life appears as inherited speech, and the modern subject appears as someone who improvises new desires inside old vocabularies. Intertextuality, in this sense, is not an interpretive add-on; it is the novel's method of representing how people live inside language (Barthes 1972).

## 5. Munif's Cities of Salt: Petro-modernity and the Counter-Archive

### 5.1 From village memory to epic chronicle

If Mahfouz concentrates the social world into an alley, Munif expands it into a landscape undergoing violent re-scaling. Cities of Salt begins before the full arrival of the oil economy, allowing the reader to experience change as rupture rather than as inevitability. The novel's narrative energy comes from juxtaposition: local habits and ecologies are narrated alongside alien infrastructures and unfamiliar languages (Munif 1984; Munif 1989; Mitchell 2011; LeMenager 2014; Szeman and Boyer 2017; Macdonald 2017).

Munif's form is closer to epic chronicle than to the tight realist plot. Instead of a single heroic protagonist, the novel develops a collective protagonist: a community whose coherence is tested by displacement, wage labor, and the reorganization of space. This collectivity is itself intertextual, because it recalls older narrative forms in Arabic culture, including oral storytelling and historical chronicles where the subject is not an interiorized individual but a group and its memory (Ibn Khaldun 2005; Ong 1982; al-Musawi 2003).

### 5.2 Oral-poetic intertexts and the politics of memory

One of Munif's most significant intertextual resources is oral-poetic culture. The novel repeatedly evokes songs, poetic fragments, and proverbial formulations that encode the community's sense of place. These intertexts work as mnemonic devices: they store ecological knowledge, social roles, and a moral economy of hospitality and obligation. When the oil project arrives, it does not only change labor relations; it threatens the conditions under which these micro-texts can continue to circulate (Ong 1982; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Ibn Khaldun 2005).

The novel's attention to oral-poetic intertexts is also political. Oral memory is positioned as a counter-archive to official documentation. By insisting on the dignity of local speech, Munif contests the tendency of development discourse to treat the pre-oil world as an empty desert waiting for value. Intertextuality here becomes a method of refusing erasure: what is remembered in songs and proverbs is re-inscribed into the novel as historical evidence (Warner 2002; Thompson 1995; Mitchell 2011).

### 5.3 Bureaucratic and corporate registers as intertextual intrusion

At the same time, Cities of Salt is saturated with non-literary discourse. Contracts, orders, reports, and managerial instructions appear as a new kind of text that enters the region with oil extraction. This is discursive borrowing in a harsh sense: institutional registers do not merely appear; they reorganize social reality. People become 'workers,' spaces become 'sites,' and time becomes a schedule (Mitchell 2011; Thompson 1995; Granovetter 1985; Searle 1995).

Munif often stages these registers through dialogue and narrated speech, allowing the reader to hear how bureaucratic language sounds inside a community that did not previously need it. The power of the new discourse lies in its claim to neutrality. It speaks in the language of efficiency, expertise, and inevitability. Intertextual reading exposes this neutrality as rhetorical: development discourse is not a transparent description of progress; it is a genre that legitimizes dispossession (Foucault 1977; Bourdieu 1993; Said 1978).

### 5.4 Sacred imagery, disenchantment, and moral bewilderment

Like Mahfouz, Munif mobilizes sacred and religious idiom, but the effect is different. In the early parts of the novel, religious language is embedded in daily life as a vocabulary of meaning and restraint. As the oil economy expands, sacred idiom increasingly registers bewilderment. It becomes a language for naming what cannot be morally digested: sudden wealth, humiliating labor regimes, and the collapse of older obligations (Izutsu 1966; Munif 1984; Mitchell 2011).

Sacred echo can also function as a critical contrast. The novel repeatedly sets inherited moral vocabulary against the behavior of new authorities. Where a contract is treated as a mere instrument of power, older notions

of trust and pledge appear as accusations. Intertextuality thus allows Munif to criticize modern transformation without romanticizing the past. The sacred register names what is lost, but it does not restore it; it reveals the scale of the ethical disruption (Luhmann 1979; Putnam 2000; Austin 1962).

### 5.5 Polyphony as an intertextual method

Munif's critique depends on polyphony. Different social groups speak in different idioms: villagers, nomads, foremen, princes, foreign engineers, and religious figures. These voices are not simply characters; they are discourses with distinct assumptions about time, value, and authority. Intertextuality here is not only a relation to earlier literary texts; it is a relation between competing institutional languages that coexist within the same historical moment (Bakhtin 1984; Bal 2009; Prince 1982; Chatman 1978).

This polyphony connects Cities of Salt to a global tradition of 'petrofiction' that explores the aesthetic difficulty of narrating oil as both material and system. Yet Munif's intertextual resources are not imported wholesale from abroad. He builds a local grammar of petro-modernity by letting the new corporate register collide with oral memory, sacred idiom, and the chronicle form. The result is a counter-archive: a novel that records not only what happened, but how it sounded as it happened (Ghosh 1992; LeMenager 2014; Macdonald 2017; Szeman and Boyer 2017; Mitchell 2011).

### 5.6 Intertextuality as political counter-infrastructure

In Cities of Salt, intertextuality functions as political counter-infrastructure. The novel exposes how power travels through texts: through contracts, regulations, and the language of expertise. It also builds an alternative record by preserving voices that official archives ignore. Intertextuality is therefore both diagnostic and constructive: it diagnoses the discursive violence of petro-modernity, and it constructs a literary space where displaced speech can endure (Jameson 1981; Mitchell 2011; Warner 2002; Bourdieu 1993).

This is why Munif's novel often feels like an argument in the form of narration. The intertexts are not ornaments; they are evidence. Oral-poetic fragments attest to a lived ecology, bureaucratic registers attest to the mechanisms of dispossession, and sacred idiom attests to moral bewilderment. Together they produce a narrative whose authority does not come from a single viewpoint but from the friction between voices (Munif 1984; al-Musawi 2003; LeMenager 2014).

## 6. Comparative Discussion: Intertextuality, Authority, and Modernity

### 6.1 Two chronotopes of modernity: alley and oil frontier

A comparative reading clarifies how intertextuality is tied to spatial imagination. Mahfouz's alley is a chronotope of enclosure: a narrow space that intensifies reputation, gossip, and moral monitoring. Munif's oil frontier is a chronotope of expansion: space is re-measured, fenced, and reorganized by machines, maps, and schedules. In both cases, intertextuality makes space readable by attaching it to inherited language. The alley is saturated with proverbs and sacred cadences that produce intimate social knowledge, while the frontier is saturated with contracts and technical registers that produce administrative legibility (Bakhtin 1981; Halliday and Hasan 1976; Mitchell 2011).

The difference matters for how modernity is narrated. In Mahfouz, modern desire appears as an internal pressure within an established discursive ecosystem. The alley already has a moral language, a social hierarchy, and a repertoire of stories; modernity reconfigures their balance. In Munif, modernity arrives as a foreign infrastructure that imports its own texts and tries to replace older ones. The struggle is therefore not only over wealth, but over which discourses will count as reality (Jameson 1981; Mitchell 2011; al-Musawi 2003).

### 6.2 Moral infrastructure and counter-infrastructure

The two novels differ in what their intertextual infrastructures accomplish. In Mahfouz, intertextuality stabilizes a moral economy even when that economy is cruel. Sacred idiom, adab observation, and proverb culture create a shared horizon within which people can accuse, excuse, forgive, or condemn. The infrastructure is not harmonious; it is a contested commons. Yet the possibility of contest presupposes shared references and shared forms of speech (Putnam 2000; Luhmann 1979; Granovetter 1985; Searle 1995).

In Munif, intertextuality is more explicitly counter-infrastructural. The novel identifies a new regime

of texts - contracts, regulations, and managerial language - that claims neutrality while reorganizing power. Munif responds by building a counter-archive that preserves oral memory and moral vocabulary as alternative evidence. If Mahfouz asks how people live inside inherited speech, Munif asks how inherited speech survives when new institutional language tries to replace it (Mitchell 2011; Thompson 1995; Warner 2002; LeMenager 2014; Macdonald 2017).

### 6.3 Authority and the politics of voice

Intertextuality is also a theory of authority, because it helps explain why some voices sound credible. In Mahfouz, credibility is distributed through communal reputation. People speak with the borrowed authority of proverbs, religious formulas, and local story types; to speak well is to speak in recognizable ways. The narrator's realism participates in this economy by translating the alley's speech into a literary form that still feels socially circulated (Austin 1962; Bourdieu 1993; Halliday and Hasan 1976).

In Munif, authority is contested at the level of register. Bureaucratic language claims authority through expertise and inevitability, while local speech claims authority through memory and moral relation. The novel's polyphony makes this conflict audible. It refuses to let corporate discourse become the only language of reality by exposing its genre features: euphemism, abstraction, and the conversion of persons into categories. Intertextuality here is a technique for de-naturalizing authority (Foucault 1977; Bourdieu 1993; Derrida 1976; Norris 1982; Said 1978).

### 6.4 Generic inheritance: realism and chronicle

The novels' differing generic inheritances shape their intertextual strategies. Mahfouz works within the realist social novel, where authority is often tied to coherence, causality, and the legibility of social types. Intertextuality strengthens this form by embedding it in the alley's micro-texts, giving the realist frame local credibility (Lukacs 1971; Somekh 1973; Moosa 1994; Chatman 1978).

Munif works closer to chronicle and epic, where authority comes from accumulation and breadth rather than plot closure. Intertextuality therefore appears as archive: the novel piles registers and voices to approximate the complexity of historical rupture and to insist that no single discourse can contain it (Munif 1984; al-Musawi 2003; Jameson 1981).

Comparison suggests that genre is itself an intertext. A realist chapter structure, a chronicle-like accumulation, or an episodic oral rhythm each carries inherited expectations about what counts as meaningful. Reading intertextually therefore requires reading generically: noticing how each author positions his work within a lineage and how that lineage supplies resources for representing modern transformation (Genette 1980; Genette 1997a; Todorov 1977; Bal 2009; Prince 1982).

### 6.5 Discursive borrowing and the materiality of language

This is where comparison becomes methodologically productive. It reveals that intertextuality is not confined to 'high' literature. Sacred idiom, oral poetry, and bureaucratic language can all function as intertexts. The crucial question is not whether a borrowing is prestigious, but what kind of power it carries and what kind of world it implies (Eagleton 1996; Eco 1979; Barthes 1972).

Both novels demonstrate that discourse is material. In Mahfouz, speech acts and micro-texts (blessings, proverbs, rumors) redistribute reputation and opportunity. In Munif, institutional texts (contracts, schedules, reports) redistribute land, labor, and visibility. Intertextual analysis brings these different materialities into the same frame by treating them as texts that do work in the world (Austin 1962; Halliday and Hasan 1976; Mitchell 2011; Thompson 1995).

### 6.6 Gender, embodiment, and the politics of visibility

A further comparative axis concerns gender and visibility. In Mahfouz, women's bodies and reputations become central sites where inherited moral language is enforced. Intertextuality is part of that enforcement: the vocabulary of purity and shame draws authority from religious resonance and communal repetition. Yet the same intertextual field can also provide languages for sympathy and critique, allowing the reader to see how social control can masquerade as moral concern (Mehrez 1994; Massad 2007; Izutsu 1966).

In Munif, gender is less foregrounded than the collective experience of displacement and labor, but the logic of visibility remains crucial. The oil economy produces new regimes of seeing: fenced compounds, controlled access, and sharp divisions between those who command and those who serve. Corporate language renders bodies as labor units, while local idiom tries to retain bodies as kin and memory. Comparison shows how intertextual infrastructures distribute visibility differently in each novel (Mitchell 2011; LeMenager 2014; Thompson 1995; Granovetter 1985).

**6.7 Translation, circulation, and the afterlives of intertexts**

Because both novels circulate globally in translation, their intertexts acquire new afterlives. A Qur'anic echo may be obvious to an Arabic reader and muted for a non-Arabic reader; a proverb may be flattened into a neutral sentence; a bureaucratic register may sound familiar to global readers because of their own experiences with institutions. Translation therefore reconfigures intertextuality, sometimes by erasing signals and sometimes by producing new ones (Mahfouz 1966; Mahfouz 1992; Munif 1987; Munif 1989; Spivak 1993; Eco 1979).
This has two implications for comparative studies. First, it encourages critics to distinguish between intertexts activated in the Arabic original and those activated in translation, without treating the latter as mere loss. Second, it highlights why intertextuality is best studied as environment rather than as a fixed list of sources. An intertext is not only a reference; it is a relation that depends on circulation, literacy, and genre competence (Spivak 1993; Wellek and Warren 1949).

Overall, comparison shows that intertextuality is a way of writing modernity as a conflict of discourses. Mahfouz emphasizes the everyday ethics of social constraint, and Munif emphasizes the political violence of petro-modernity's legitimizing language. In both novels, intertextuality is the medium of argument, and comparative reading is the method that makes that argument visible (Wellek and Warren 1949; al-Musawi 2003; Szeman and Boyer 2017; Jameson 1981).

**6.8 Comparative vignettes: the grammar of the everyday and the rhetoric of development**

Two brief comparative vignettes can clarify what may otherwise remain abstract. In Midaq Alley, the social world is staged through the acoustics of the qahwa and the corridor: voices ricochet, a proverb settles a dispute, a blessing closes an exchange, and a rumor quietly recalibrates a woman's future. The alley's intertexts are small, portable, and intimate. They function like coins passed from hand to hand—worn by repetition, trusted because they have circulated. In Cities of Salt, the decisive exchanges are often textual before they are physical: a contract precedes a bulldozer; a report precedes a fence; a schedule precedes a new discipline of the body. Here the intertext is not a proverb but a form—an administrative genre that arrives with the authority of inevitability and teaches the region to see itself as a "project."

Seen side by side, these scenes show that intertextuality is not simply a matter of quotation but of governance. The alley is governed by moral speech: reputations are made and unmade through utterances whose force depends on inherited idiom. The frontier is governed by managerial speech: persons are translated into categories, and categories into policy. In Bhabha's terms, both novels register a struggle over the "location" of cultural meaning under modern pressure, yet they stage that struggle through different textual technologies—one communal and sedimented, the other imported and bureaucratically standardized (Bhabha 1994; Austin 1962; Thompson 1995).

A second vignette concerns promises. Mahfouz's characters live amid everyday pledges—marriage promises, work promises, promises of escape from poverty—that often collapse under economic constraint. Munif's world is saturated with grander promises: development, modernization, prosperity. Both sets of promises operate as speech acts that attempt to bring a future into being, yet each novel shows how the credibility of a promise depends on its surrounding infrastructure of trust. Where the communal commons of speech thins, promises become mere rhetoric; where institutions monopolize language, promises become instruments of rule. The comparative lesson is sobering: modernity can multiply promises while hollowing out the conditions that make promises believable (Putnam 2000; Luhmann 1979; Warner 2002).

These vignettes also underline why comparative literature is not a decorative posture in this study. Comparison is the test that forces concepts to travel. When "intertextuality" is made to account for both the alley's micro-texts and the oil frontier's bureaucratic genres, it becomes less mystical and more precise: a way

of naming how texts authorize, constrain, and reorganize social life. In this sense, intertextual infrastructure is not a metaphor only; it is a comparative tool for reading Arabic fiction across distinct modernities without dissolving them into a single story (Wellek and Warren 1949; al-Musawi 2003).

**7. Conclusion**

This article has argued for reading intertextuality as infrastructure: the background system of textual and discursive relations that makes narrative authority credible, moral judgment intelligible, and historical imagination plausible. By placing Mahfouz's Midaq Alley alongside Munif's Cities of Salt, the study has shown that intertextuality is not a marginal feature of style but a central strategy of argument in modern Arabic fiction. In Mahfouz, intertextuality stabilizes a moral microcosm. Sacred idiom, adab observation, proverb culture, and realist convention overlap to produce a social world where people live inside inherited speech and where ethical conflict is staged as conflict between languages. In Munif, intertextuality builds a counter-archive. Oral poetry, local memory, and sacred imagery are set against bureaucratic and corporate registers that accompany oil extraction, revealing how modern power travels through texts as much as through machines.

The comparative frame matters because it shifts intertextuality away from influence-hunting and toward mapping discursive environments. It also invites a broader agenda for comparative Arabic literary studies across Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula: one that traces how different modernities generate different textual infrastructures, and how novels respond by reworking inherited vocabularies of authority. Future work could extend this approach to gendered narration, to popular genres, and to the digital afterlives of intertexts in contemporary Arabic culture. For now, the two novels read here suggest a shared conclusion: modern transformation is not only a change in institutions and economies, but also a change in the languages through which people recognize themselves and their worlds.

**8. Implications for Comparative Arabic Literary Studies**

Treating intertextuality as infrastructure reshapes comparative method. It asks critics to compare not only plots and themes, but the discursive environments that make a narrative world credible: sacred idiom, proverb culture, institutional registers, and translated genres.

This approach helps avoid two traps. It resists essentialism, where 'Egyptian' or 'Gulf' literature is treated as a single voice, and it resists inflation, where intertextuality becomes a label for everything and therefore explains nothing.

A practical implication is to link intertextual reading to institutions of circulation. School curricula, sermons, broadcast media, administrative paperwork, and translation markets all shape what counts as a shared reference in a given setting.

Mahfouz's Cairo presupposes a dense urban public sphere where scripture, proverb, popular song, cinema, and adab can coexist in everyday speech. Munif's oil frontier presupposes a different circulation regime, where contracts, reports, and managerial language arrive as imported texts that reorganize social reality.

This framework also reframes questions of originality and borrowing. Arabic criticism has long debated reuse in terms of theft and imitation, but the comparative readings here suggest a different question: what does a borrowing borrow authority for?

A Qur'anic cadence can authorize compassion or legitimize surveillance; a proverb can protect communal wisdom or end critical thinking; a bureaucratic report can coordinate labor or hide violence behind neutrality. Intertextuality matters because it is one of the main ways texts distribute credibility.

The concept of intertextual infrastructure also connects literary analysis to broader humanities debates about legitimacy and governance. Both novels show that power is textual: it governs through documents and procedures, but also through micro-texts such as rumor and reputational labeling.

Finally, the approach can be extended to Saudi novelistic modernity beyond Munif. Contemporary Saudi fiction often stages rapid change through collisions of religious idiom, tribal memory, global popular culture, and state or corporate discourse. Comparative intertextual analysis can map these collisions and clarify how different writers imagine agency, gender, and belonging under development.

A related methodological point concerns scale. Intertextuality becomes visible at micro-scale (a phrase, cadence, or proverb) and at macro-scale (genre, chronotope, and institutional register). A strong comparative

study should move between scales rather than staying at one level.

At micro-scale, the critic can ask how a single borrowed formula changes the moral temperature of a scene. At macro-scale, the critic can ask how a novel's generic inheritance - realism, chronicle, allegory, or thriller - provides a repository of expectations that guides reading before any explicit reference appears.

This movement between scales can also support innovation in humanities research. It opens paths for combining close reading with archival work on curricula, sermon culture, or administrative documentation, and for combining literary analysis with concepts such as social trust, transaction cost, and legitimacy in the sociology of institutions.

In short, intertextuality provides a common language for studying how texts remember, how they authorize, and how they resist. Comparative work that foregrounds intertextual infrastructure can therefore illuminate not only literary history, but the cultural mechanisms by which modern Arab societies have narrated change.

**9. Limitations and Research Agenda**

This study favors interpretive depth over corpus breadth. Focusing on two novels allows the analysis to trace intertextual mechanisms at multiple scales, from micro-texts in dialogue to generic inheritance. The trade-off is that other infrastructures, especially those shaped by gendered narration, regional dialect writing, and popular genres, remain outside the present focus.

A second limitation concerns the visibility of intertexts. Recognition depends on religious literacy, cultural memory, and familiarity with genre conventions. For this reason, the article emphasizes structurally salient traces such as register shifts, repeated formulas, and institutional discourse, rather than rare allusions that only specialists can recover.

Translation is a third limitation and also an opportunity. Because both novels circulate in English and other languages, intertextual environments are never identical across readerships. Some Qur'anic echoes are muted, some proverbs lose force, and some bureaucratic registers gain familiarity for readers who have experienced similar institutions. Comparative work can treat these shifts not only as loss but as the creation of new intertextual relations.

These limitations suggest a research agenda. One direction is to extend the Saudi side of the comparison beyond Munif to later writers and to different social positions, tracking how contemporary Saudi fiction stages collisions between religious idiom, global popular culture, and state documentation in narratives of urbanization, gender negotiation, and generational conflict.

A second direction is methodological: combining close reading with modest archival work. Mapping the circulation of school texts, sermon themes, newspaper genres, and administrative documents would help specify which intertexts are likely to be shared at a given historical moment and how non-literary textual regimes shape literary form.

Finally, the framework can be adapted to comparative work across other Arabic literary ecologies, including the Levant and North Africa. By focusing on intertextual infrastructure, critics can compare how different modernities are narrated as conflicts of discourse and how novels build authority by reworking inherited vocabularies of legitimacy.

A final extension is to operationalize intertextual mapping more explicitly. Without turning interpretation into mere counting, researchers can catalogue recurring registers (scripture, proverb, corporate jargon, legal formulae) and track where they cluster in narrative time: in openings, turning points, or moments of collective crisis. This would make it possible to compare not only which intertexts are present, but how they are distributed, intensified, and transformed, and to relate those patterns to broader historical shifts in literacy, media, and governance.

Such mapping can also bridge close reading and social history. When a register spikes at particular moments, the critic can ask what institutional pressure is being dramatized and what moral language is being recruited to meet it. The result is a comparative model that remains textual while staying sensitive to changing infrastructures of education, media, and governance.

As a closing methodological note, the analyses above suggest that intertextuality is most persuasive when treated as an ecology of constraints and permissions rather than as an archive of 'sources.' In both Cairo

and the oil frontier, some idioms circulate as common sense, some registers arrive as instruments of rule, and some genres function as templates for imagining the social. Comparative criticism can therefore ask not only 'what is referenced' but 'what kind of social relation a reference builds': solidarity, suspicion, obedience, or dissent. This shift preserves the rigor of close reading while giving it a wider humanities relevance to questions of legitimacy, memory, and modern transformation.

One further avenue is to examine the digital afterlives of intertexts. Social media quotation, online fatwas, and searchable news archives change how scriptural phrases, proverbs, and bureaucratic clichés circulate, and they can feed back into contemporary fiction as ready-made fragments. Comparative analysis that tracks these digital circuits could refine the idea of intertextual infrastructure for the present moment, where textual authority is increasingly negotiated in networked publics.

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