



REVIEW ARTICLE

Section: *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism*

Desert futures and the ethics of care: Environmental imagination social responsibility and the sustainable development goals in Saudi literature in English

Wael Matar Hasan Alharbi^{1*} & Mohammad Osman Abdul Wahab²¹Department of Arabic Language, College of Education, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia²Department of English, Faculty of Languages and Translation, King Khalid University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*Correspondence: wae.alharbi@psau.edu.sa

ABSTRACT

Environmental sustainability is often discussed through targets, indicators, and institutional reports. Literature approaches the same questions differently. It makes development perceptible as an alteration of water, land, memory, labour, and everyday belonging. This article examines Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* and Raja Alem's *The Dove's Necklace* as Saudi-centred literary works available in English that expose the social life of environmental change. Through comparative close reading informed by postcolonial ecocriticism, energy humanities, urban political ecology, and the ethics of care, the study asks how the novels distribute environmental responsibility, represent institutions, and imagine alternatives to extractive or exclusionary development. *Cities of Salt* narrates the destruction of an oasis and the conversion of a lived landscape into petroleum infrastructure. *The Dove's Necklace* turns Mecca's Abu al-Ruos alley into a speaking witness to speculative construction, waste, damaged heritage, and unequal mobility. Read together, the novels shift attention from individual blame to systems of decision-making while refusing to erase personal complicity. Their environmental imagination intersects especially with Sustainable Development Goals 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, and 16, as well as the educational ambitions of SDG 4.7. The article does not treat fiction as evidence of national SDG performance. Instead, it argues that literary form supplies an ethical and interpretive supplement to sustainability governance: it reveals whose losses are hidden by aggregate measures, how benefits and burdens are unevenly assigned, and why ecological repair requires memory, participation, and institutional accountability. Saudi literature in English thereby becomes a valuable space for teaching sustainability as a question of relationships rather than a checklist of technical achievements.

KEYWORDS: Saudi literature in English, ecocriticism, environmental humanities, *Cities of Salt*, *The Dove's Necklace*, sustainable development, ethics of care, SDGs

Research Journal in Advanced Humanities

Volume 7, Issue 4, 2026

ISSN: 2708-5945 (Print)

ISSN: 2708-5953 (Online)

ARTICLE HISTORY

Submitted: 27 June 2026

Accepted: 20 August 2026

Published: 11 September 2026

HOW TO CITE

Alharbi, W. M. H., & Wahab, M. O. A. (2026). Desert futures and the ethics of care: Environmental imagination social responsibility and the sustainable development goals in Saudi literature in English. *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities*, 7(4). <https://doi.org/10.58256/x59d7x34>



Published in Nairobi, Kenya by Royallite Global, an imprint of Royallite Publishers Limited

© 2026 The Author(s). This is an open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

1 Introduction

The language of sustainability is designed to travel. Its goals, indicators, and timelines allow institutions to coordinate action across borders. That portability is indispensable, yet it can also flatten the places to which it is applied. Water becomes a unit of supply, land a percentage of protected territory, work a rate of participation, and the city a bundle of services. Literary writing reverses this movement toward abstraction. It returns environmental change to the scale of a well, a road, an uprooted tree, a demolished house, a body made tired by labour, or a neighbourhood that can no longer recognise itself. The value of literature is not that it replaces measurement. It is that it asks what measurement leaves out.

This question has particular force in Saudi Arabia, where aridity, oil, rapid urbanisation, sacred geography, and ambitious programmes of economic transformation meet. The national sustainability conversation now includes renewable energy, land restoration, water security, liveable cities, heritage protection, and institutional effectiveness. The Saudi Green Initiative brings together environmental protection, energy transition, and emissions-reduction programmes, while Vision 2030 places quality of life, diversification, and public-sector performance within a shared national project (Saudi Green Initiative, n.d.; Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). These commitments intersect with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, especially those concerning water, decent work, inequality, cities, consumption, climate, terrestrial ecosystems, education, and accountable institutions (United Nations, 2015). Their importance makes critical interpretation more necessary, not less. A national project is strongest when its public language can accommodate difficult memories, uneven experiences, and competing ideas of the good life.

This article turns to two novels whose Saudi settings are transformed by powerful development regimes: Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*, translated into English by Peter Theroux, and Raja Alem's *The Dove's Necklace*, translated by Katharine Halls and Adam Talib. The phrase "Saudi literature in English" is used carefully here. It does not claim that both works were originally composed in English. It identifies an English-language field of circulation produced through translation, publication, teaching, and criticism. That field matters because translated literature often becomes the medium through which international readers encounter Saudi and Gulf environments. Translation expands the novels' audiences while also placing their local landscapes inside global conversations about petroleum, urbanisation, environmental justice, and sustainable development.

The selected works are separated by period, style, and scale. *Cities of Salt* reconstructs the arrival of an American oil company in an unnamed Gulf polity recognisably shaped by the history of the Arabian Peninsula. Its opening destruction of Wadi al-Uyoun transforms an oasis of water, trees, animals, routes, and collective memory into an extractive zone. *The Dove's Necklace*, set in contemporary Mecca, is narrated in part by Abu al-Roos, an alley that observes the investigation of a woman's death while recounting speculation, demolition, rubbish, traffic, migration, longing, and the remaking of sacred space. One novel maps the birth of an oil order; the other dwells among the urban consequences of accelerated capital. Together they offer a historical arc from concessionary extraction to metropolitan redevelopment.

The article asks three questions. First, how do the novels make environmental harm narratively visible through setting, voice, temporality, and character? Second, how do they allocate responsibility among individuals, companies, state authorities, markets, and communities? Third, what can their literary imagination contribute to an SDG-oriented understanding of Saudi social institutions? The argument is that both novels replace simple stories of blame with relational accounts of responsibility. They show environmental damage emerging from arrangements that divide knowledge from power, benefits from burdens, and decision makers from affected places. Yet they do not dissolve agency into an impersonal "system." Officials, managers, merchants, workers, residents, and witnesses retain different degrees of choice. The novels therefore support an ethics of care in which sustainability depends on attentive perception, historical memory, public answerability, and the capacity of affected communities to participate in decisions.

2 Literature Sustainability and the Saudi Context

Ecocriticism began by asking how literature represents the physical environment, but the field has moved well beyond celebrations of wilderness. Buell (1995, 2001) established that environmental texts organise ethical attention and imagine relations between human and nonhuman worlds. Environmental justice scholarship then insisted that nature cannot be separated from race, class, labour, colonial history, and uneven exposure to

harm. Postcolonial ecocriticism is especially important for the Gulf because it resists models that romanticise untouched nature while ignoring empire, extraction, and development. DeLoughrey and Handley (2011) describe environmental imagination as inseparable from histories of conquest and resistance. Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence further explains why ecological harm is difficult to narrate: damage may be delayed, dispersed, and excluded from spectacular accounts of progress.

Energy humanities adds another dimension. Modern literary forms are entangled with energy regimes even when fuel remains outside the foreground. Yaeger (2011) urges critics to notice the energy sources that make cultural worlds possible, while Barrett and Worden (2012) identify oil culture as a field extending beyond the visible refinery or well. LeMenager (2014) calls the affective attachment to petroleum "living oil," a phrase that captures how fossil energy settles into habits, mobility, architecture, and desire. These approaches are useful for *Cities of Salt* because oil functions not merely as a commodity but as a reorganising force. It alters time, work, authority, space, and the imaginable future. Al-Raddadi (2022) reads Munif's novel as an aesthetics of the oppressed, showing how its representation of oil capitalism joins environmental dispossession to political domination.

Urban political ecology helps bridge Munif's oasis and Alem's alley. Cities are not opposed to nature; they are socio-ecological formations through which water, energy, waste, capital, people, and authority circulate. Swyngedouw (2004) demonstrates that urban water is simultaneously material, political, and symbolic. A pipe or sewer is never only infrastructure: it records choices about whose needs are prioritised and whose environments absorb the cost. This insight applies to literary cities as well. The rubbish, dust, traffic, sewage, building sites, and crowded rooms of *The Dove's Necklace* disclose a metabolism of urban development. The alley's voice makes that metabolism intimate, translating flows of capital and material into remembered lives.

The ethics of care supplies the normative centre of this study. Care is sometimes reduced to private kindness, but care ethicists treat it as a public practice of maintaining the world in which life can flourish. Tronto (1993) links care to attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness. Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) extends care to more-than-human relations and warns that care is never innocent: every act of maintenance can include some beings while neglecting others. An environmental ethics of care therefore asks who notices damage, who is expected to repair it, whether institutions possess the competence to respond, and whether those affected can judge the adequacy of the response. These questions clarify the difference between paternal protection and participatory stewardship.

The SDGs offer a practical vocabulary for connecting these literary insights to institutional concerns. The clearest link is SDG 11, particularly the aspiration to make settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable and to safeguard cultural heritage. Water loss in *Cities of Salt* invokes SDG 6; labour restructuring invokes SDG 8; unequal exposure and displacement invoke SDG 10; extractive consumption invokes SDG 12; the fossil-energy order invokes SDG 13; oasis destruction invokes SDG 15; and failures of participation and accountability invoke SDG 16. *The Dove's Necklace* similarly brings together sustainable urbanism, heritage, waste, inequality, and institutional trust. SDG 4.7 is relevant at a second level because it calls for education that supports sustainable development, human rights, cultural diversity, and global citizenship. Literary study can contribute by training readers to interpret competing values and recognise lives hidden by aggregated narratives. This mapping must not become an exercise in attaching colourful goal icons to novels. The SDGs were not the compositional blueprint for either text, and their targets do not exhaust the novels' moral worlds. A responsible comparison works in two directions. The goals help name the institutional fields implicated by the fiction, while the fiction tests the adequacy of the goals' public language. For example, SDG 11 can count access to transport or the protection of heritage, but a novel can show how a resident experiences a city in which mobility increases while belonging contracts. SDG 8 can measure employment, while narrative can ask whether work produces dignity, estrangement, surveillance, or silence. The literary contribution lies in this pressure upon categories.

3 Corpus and Method

The primary corpus consists of the first volume of Munif's *Cities of Salt* in Peter Theroux's English translation (1989) and Alem's *The Dove's Necklace* in the English translation by Katharine Halls and Adam Talib (2016). The corpus is deliberately small. Comparative close reading requires sustained attention to narrative structure, figurative language, spatial organisation, focalisation, and recurring material objects. Expanding the dataset

without equivalent depth would produce thematic cataloguing rather than literary analysis.

The works meet four selection criteria. Each is substantially located in a Saudi or Saudi-coded environment; each represents large-scale material transformation; each makes institutions visible through their effects on daily life; and each circulates in English translation. *Cities of Salt* provides an account of petroleum modernity and oasis destruction. *The Dove's Necklace* provides an account of sacred urbanism, construction, waste, mobility, and heritage. Their differences are methodologically productive. Munif uses an expansive collective narrative in which communities confront the abrupt arrival of machinery and corporate power. Alem gives the alley a voice and builds a dense, sometimes elusive detective narrative around fragments, bodies, secrets, and urban memory. The analysis proceeded through iterative close reading organised around five interpretive categories: environmental perception, material transformation, distribution of benefit and harm, institutional visibility, and imagined repair. Passages were examined for references to water, vegetation, animals, oil, machines, waste, roads, buildings, bodies, labour, sacred space, and memory. Attention then shifted from objects to form: who perceives the change, whose speech is authorised, how quickly events unfold, and what kinds of causality the narrative encourages. The two works were compared without claiming equivalence between an oasis and Mecca or between concessionary oil extraction and contemporary redevelopment.

The study draws on postcolonial ecocriticism to situate environment within power, energy humanities to interpret petroleum's cultural reach, urban political ecology to read infrastructure and waste, and care ethics to evaluate practices of attention and responsibility. The SDGs function as a final analytical lens rather than a coding scheme imposed in advance. After the literary interpretation was developed, its institutional implications were related to relevant goals and targets. This order protects the complexity of the novels and prevents the argument from reducing scenes to illustrations of policy terminology.

Two limitations should be explicit. First, analysis in English depends on translation. Lexical texture, dialect, rhythm, and cultural reference may be altered even when the translation is accomplished. This is not merely a defect; it is part of the object of study because English-language circulation shapes international reception. Nevertheless, claims about exact Arabic wording lie outside the article's scope. Second, the corpus cannot represent all Saudi literature, social institutions, or regional environments. It offers theoretically grounded case readings. Its conclusions concern what these novels enable readers to perceive, not what all Saudi citizens experience or what every institution does.

4 The Oasis and the Violence of Becoming Infrastructure

Cities of Salt begins with a place that development discourse might call remote but that its inhabitants experience as a centre. Wadi al-Uyoun is sustained by water, palms, animals, routes, stories, and repeated practices of hospitality. The oasis is neither untouched wilderness nor a static remnant of the past. It is a working social ecology. People move through it, draw sustenance from it, assign meaning to its features, and maintain relations that exceed private ownership. Munif's achievement is to make this density palpable before the arrival of the company. Destruction consequently registers as more than a change of land use. A world of orientation is removed.

The machines that uproot the trees enact an epistemic as well as material violence. Corporate actors see a concession, a site, and a logistical problem. Residents see shade, water, ancestry, livelihood, and continuity. The asymmetry is not simply a disagreement over values; one vision possesses the machinery and authorisation to become real. The other is treated as sentiment, obstruction, or ignorance. This pattern illuminates a central problem in institutional sustainability: consultation cannot be meaningful if local knowledge enters only after the range of possible decisions has already been closed.

Water gives the conflict its deepest ethical charge. In an arid environment, the spring is not scenery. It is the condition that permits human and nonhuman life to gather. Its destruction or appropriation therefore touches SDG 6, but the novel complicates the goal's managerial vocabulary. "Access" is not only physical proximity to a supply. It includes continuity, collective authority, cultural meaning, and trust in the institutions governing the resource. A newly engineered provision may deliver water and still represent loss if it breaks a community's ability to shape the terms of its own dwelling. Swyngedouw's (2004) account of water as a socio-natural flow helps explain why hydraulic change is simultaneously ecological and political.

Munif also changes the reader's experience of time. Company operations arrive with urgency: surveys,

orders, vehicles, construction, and new labour rhythms compress deliberation. The residents' memory works at another pace. Their knowledge accumulates through seasons and generations. Sustainability depends on negotiating these temporalities, yet the novel depicts acceleration as authority. Speed becomes proof that the new order is inevitable. Once inevitability is accepted, responsibility becomes difficult to locate. A tree was not uprooted by "modernisation" in the abstract; people operated machines under organisational instructions made possible by political agreements. The narrative restores this chain without pretending that every participant has equal power.

The movement from Wadi al-Uyoun to Harran expands the ecology of extraction. Oil does not remain underground or inside company compounds. It reorganises the port, housing, transport, consumption, labour, and surveillance. Harran's divided spaces disclose unequal citizenship: foreign managers and local workers inhabit different material worlds even when their labour contributes to the same enterprise. This spatial segregation links environmental and social sustainability. SDG 8's concern with decent work cannot be isolated from housing, health, dignity, and voice; SDG 10's concern with inequality cannot be isolated from who breathes dust, bears heat, or loses access to familiar land.

The company's built environment promises permanence while producing transience. Roads, compounds, and port facilities appear solid, but their purpose is the removal and circulation of a finite resource. Munif's title condenses the contradiction. Salt can preserve, but cities of salt can also dissolve. The metaphor denies the fantasy that monumental infrastructure guarantees an enduring social order. A city may survive materially while losing the relations that make it liveable. This is a crucial intervention in SDG 11. Resilience cannot mean only the durability of assets; it must include the capacity of communities, ecosystems, and memories to endure without being sacrificed to those assets.

Responsibility in the novel is distributed but not diluted. Foreign corporate power is central because it supplies capital, technology, spatial discipline, and racial hierarchy. Local rulers and intermediaries enable access and translate external demands into commands. Merchants identify opportunities, workers make constrained choices, and residents sometimes reproduce the new order even as they suffer from it. A simplistic blame narrative would divide innocent community from guilty institution. Munif is more demanding. He shows how dependence grows, how desire adjusts, and how institutional arrangements recruit people into practices they did not design. The moral question is not who remains pure, but who has the power to alter the arrangement and who is required to pay for it.

The figure of Miteb al-Hathal carries the memory of refusal. His resistance is sometimes read as attachment to a vanishing world, yet it also embodies environmental foresight. He recognises that the loss is systemic before others can name the system. His disappearance gives resistance a spectral form: the excluded witness returns as rumour, memory, and unsettled conscience. From the perspective of care ethics, Miteb practices attentiveness to the oasis, but he lacks an institution capable of receiving and acting upon that knowledge. The tragedy is therefore not only that a warning goes unheeded. It is that the decision-making structure has no responsive channel through which the warning could matter.

This reading reframes the novel's relation to climate action. *Cities of Salt* does not narrate contemporary climate science, and it should not be forced into the vocabulary of SDG 13. It instead narrates the cultural formation that made fossil dependence appear normal, desirable, and unavoidable. Energy transition requires technological substitution, but the novel suggests that substitution alone is insufficient. If extractive habits of perception remain—if land is empty until monetised and communities are obstacles until relocated—then a formally green project may reproduce an older injustice. The literary lesson is procedural and ethical: the means of sustainability must themselves be sustainable.

5 The Alley as Witness to Unequal Urban Change

If *Cities of Salt* begins with the destruction of a living landscape, *The Dove's Necklace* begins with a body in an alley. The apparent crime invites a search for an individual culprit, but the novel steadily widens the field of implication. Abu al-Roos speaks as a wounded archive of Mecca. Its personified voice remembers residents, buildings, smells, desires, humiliations, and transformations that no official map could contain. By granting narrative agency to a place, Alem makes environment a witness rather than a backdrop.

The alley's testimony changes the scale of urban analysis. Grand accounts of redevelopment emphasise

circulation, capacity, investment, and visual order. Abu al-Roos notices what happens between these categories: rubbish accumulating near bodies, old structures becoming vulnerable, intimate routes disappearing, migrant labour remaining socially peripheral, and residents negotiating congestion and speculation. The alley is not inherently virtuous. It contains secrecy, exploitation, and exclusion. Its value as narrator lies in its compromised proximity. It knows the city from below because it bears the marks of what passes through it.

Waste is especially revealing. Waste is matter declared out of place, but the power to make that declaration is uneven. Prestigious spaces can externalise their refuse; marginal spaces become expected to receive it. In the novel, dirt and discarded material are not merely symbols of moral corruption. They are elements of an urban metabolism that links consumption to invisibility. SDG 12's call for responsible consumption and production acquires a social question: responsible to whom? A waste system is not sustainable when it removes material from affluent sight while concentrating nuisance, risk, and stigma elsewhere.

The novel's Mecca is sacred, commercial, historical, and infrastructural at once. These dimensions cannot be separated without distortion. Pilgrimage requires mobility, accommodation, sanitation, safety, and organisational competence. At the same time, expansion can threaten built heritage and forms of neighbourhood memory. The ethical challenge is not to choose a frozen past over the needs of living pilgrims. It is to prevent capacity and profit from becoming the only measures of value. SDG 11.4 explicitly joins sustainable cities to the safeguarding of cultural and natural heritage. Alem's fiction shows why heritage is more than preserved façades. It includes patterns of encounter, vernacular knowledge, and the right of residents to recognise their city.

The Dove's Necklace also challenges the fantasy of the transparent city. Planning often imagines that better surveillance, mapping, or data will make urban life fully legible. The detective plot repeatedly encounters obscurity. Identities shift; documents and stories conflict; desire exceeds administrative categories. This opacity is not an argument against evidence. It is a reminder that institutional knowledge is partial and that vulnerable people can be harmed when uncertainty is converted too quickly into accusation. SDG 16's language of effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions therefore has an interpretive dimension. Accountability requires institutions to know the limits of what they know.

Gender intensifies this problem. Women's bodies and movements are read by family, police, markets, and rumour, often before women can authorise their own meanings. The dead woman at the centre of the investigation risks becoming an object through which others tell stories. Alem resists that closure by multiplying voices and refusing a neat recovery of truth. Environmental justice and gender justice meet here because both concern the politics of exposure: whose body is publicly interpreted, whose movement is constrained, and whose vulnerability is treated as ordinary. The connection to SDG 10 is not decorative. An inclusive city must distribute not only services but also interpretive standing—the ability to be heard as a knower of one's own circumstances.

Mobility produces a related inequality. Mecca is defined by immense movement, yet not everyone moves with the same freedom or purpose. Pilgrims, residents, workers, officials, developers, and investors occupy different routes and temporalities. Infrastructure may accelerate some travellers while displacing or delaying others. The novel's crowded form, with its digressions and crossings, resists a clean, linear image of movement. It makes congestion a narrative principle. Readers must inhabit friction rather than view the city from above. Where *Cities of Salt* shows the violence of beginning, *The Dove's Necklace* shows the difficulty of repair within an already layered metropolis. No return to an untouched city is possible. Abu al-Roos has always been shaped by movement, commerce, belief, and unequal power. Care must therefore be reparative rather than nostalgic. It would involve competent maintenance, protection of meaningful structures, dignified treatment of migrant and low-income residents, responsible waste systems, and public processes that recognise local knowledge. It would also require accepting that sacred value cannot be fully translated into real-estate value.

The alley narrator performs the first act of care: attention. It notices what dominant perspectives edit out. Yet attention alone does not repair drains, preserve houses, regulate construction, or protect workers. Here literature points beyond itself toward institutions. The novel's ethical achievement is to make neglect perceptible; governance must convert such perception into standards, budgets, enforcement, participation, and review. Care ethics prevents the move from being sentimental because competence is one of care's conditions. A well-intentioned institution that cannot maintain infrastructure or respond to affected communities still fails to care.

7 An SDG Oriented Literary Framework

The comparative reading yields a framework through which English-literature teaching and research can engage Saudi sustainability without converting novels into policy documents. The framework has four movements: perceive, historicise, distribute, and imagine.

Perception concerns what becomes visible. Students can trace water, trees, dust, oil, waste, roads, buildings, animals, and bodies, asking how narrative form directs attention toward or away from them. This supports SDG 4.7 by developing sustainability literacy as interpretive competence. It also resists the assumption that environmental education belongs only to scientific subjects. Scientific literacy explains processes; literary literacy examines value, voice, metaphor, and the social distribution of attention.

Historicisation asks how present environments were produced. *Cities of Salt* refuses the idea that the oil city arrived naturally, while *The Dove's Necklace* treats the contemporary city as an accumulation of sacred history, migration, commerce, demolition, and memory. For SDGs 11, 12, and 13, this matters because unsustainable systems acquire the appearance of inevitability when their histories are forgotten. Historical narration reveals choices and therefore reopens the possibility of different choices.

Distribution maps benefit, burden, voice, and obligation. Readers ask who gains mobility, employment, profit, housing, or safety; who experiences displacement, pollution, precarity, or silence; and which actors can change the rules. This movement joins SDGs 8 and 10 to ecological goals. It prevents sustainability from becoming a technically green programme that leaves labour and inequality outside the frame.

Imagination evaluates alternatives. Neither novel supplies a ready policy package, but each exposes the ethical conditions any credible solution must meet. A sustainable intervention should respect ecological limits, preserve meaningful memory, provide dignified work, distribute costs fairly, invite affected knowledge, and remain open to revision. These conditions connect SDGs 6, 11, 12, 13, 15, and 16. They can be used in interdisciplinary classrooms, sustainability workshops, heritage discussions, and institutional ethics programmes. For Saudi universities, literature departments can contribute to sustainability agendas through curriculum, research, and public engagement. Curriculum can include Saudi and Gulf writing alongside global climate fiction, avoiding the impression that environmental imagination is imported. Research can connect textual scholarship with geography, planning, heritage studies, translation, and environmental communication. Public engagement can use reading groups, exhibitions, oral-history projects, and place-based writing to preserve experiences of environmental change. These activities should not be claimed as substitutes for engineering or policy expertise. Their distinctive contribution is ethical interpretation.

Finally, the framework recommends institutional humility. Plans operate through forecasts, but environments contain uncertainty and unintended consequences. Literature is unusually good at holding incomplete knowledge without abandoning judgment. The unresolved elements of Alem's detective narrative and the spectral resistance in Munif's novel train readers to live with uncertainty while remaining answerable for action. An accountable institution is not one that claims perfect foresight. It is one that monitors consequences, listens to criticism, corrects error, and preserves the evidence needed for public learning.

8 Discussion

Reading the novels together reveals a shared geography of interrupted care. Wadi al-Uyoun is treated as available because decision makers fail to recognise the relationships that sustain it. Abu al-Roos is treated as disposable because its density of life is misread as disorder. In both cases, a dominant institutional gaze simplifies place before transforming it. The oasis becomes a resource site; the alley becomes an obstacle to circulation or profit. Literary form restores thickness to what such gazes thin out.

The comparison also reveals an important difference. Munif dramatises an external company entering a community through alliance with local authority. Responsibility is organised around concession, extraction, and an emerging state-corporate order. Alem writes from within a mature city whose conflicts circulate through many institutions and desires. Her environmental politics is less easily localised. This difference suggests that sustainability governance must evolve with the systems it addresses. Early extractive harms may demand protection and consent at the point of entry; complex urban harms also demand coordination across housing, transport, heritage, waste, labour, and policing.

Both works challenge a celebratory version of modernisation, but neither supports a simple rejection of

development. The inhabitants need livelihoods, safety, services, and mobility. Pilgrims need infrastructure. The ethical dispute concerns the form, pace, and distribution of development. Nostalgia becomes inadequate when it imagines that earlier social arrangements were free of hierarchy or hardship. A care-based reading instead asks how beneficial change can occur without declaring existing lives expendable.

This qualification is important in contemporary Saudi discussion. Vision 2030 and the Saudi Green Initiative articulate real commitments to environmental protection, quality of life, diversification, and institutional performance. Literary criticism should neither function as publicity nor assume that scepticism is the only form of seriousness. It can offer constructive scrutiny by identifying failure patterns that ambitious programmes should avoid: treating arid land as empty, separating heritage monuments from lived neighbourhoods, measuring construction more readily than maintenance, shifting ecological costs toward low-power groups, and equating public participation with one-way communication.

The English-language circulation of the novels introduces another tension. Global readers may interpret Saudi environments through familiar frames of oil wealth, authoritarian power, sacred exceptionalism, or endangered tradition. These frames can illuminate, but they can also reduce. A comparative environmental humanities should allow the novels to revise global theory. The oasis is not merely an example of “resource extraction,” and Mecca is not merely an example of “unsustainable urbanisation.” Their particular histories alter what those categories mean. Responsible criticism therefore moves between concept and place, allowing each to correct the other.

The resulting account of sustainability is neither purely preservationist nor purely developmental. It is relational. A sustainable Saudi institution would not be defined only by the longevity of its programmes or the efficiency of its resource use. It would be judged by whether it maintains the ecological and social relations on which life depends, distributes vulnerability fairly, remembers prior damage, and remains answerable to those affected. Literature cannot build such an institution, but it can educate the perception without which the institution may not know what it is destroying.

9 Conclusion

Cities of Salt and The Dove’s Necklace transform environmental change into an encounter with responsibility. Munif’s oasis makes the beginning of petroleum modernity visible as the destruction of a social ecology and the silencing of situated knowledge. Alem’s speaking alley reveals a sacred metropolis in which development, waste, heritage, mobility, gender, and inequality occupy the same crowded space. Their forms differ, yet both refuse to isolate environmental damage from institutions and everyday life.

The study has argued that these novels contribute to the Saudi sustainability conversation through an ethics of care organised around attention, history, differentiated responsibility, competence, and responsiveness. Their relevance to the SDGs is strongest when the goals are treated as a vocabulary for dialogue rather than a grid that masters the texts. The fiction deepens SDGs 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, and 16 by showing how resources, labour, cities, climate, land, and governance are joined in lived experience. It supports SDG 4.7 by demonstrating why literary education belongs within education for sustainable development.

The practical implication is modest but consequential. Saudi universities, cultural organisations, heritage bodies, and sustainability programmes can use literature to examine how institutional decisions are felt, remembered, and contested. Such use should preserve literary difficulty, acknowledge translation, and avoid presenting fictional scenes as empirical findings. Literature’s value lies elsewhere: it can disclose the costs hidden by smooth narratives, test the moral adequacy of solutions, and keep alternative futures imaginable.

Sustainability ultimately concerns what a society chooses to carry forward. Infrastructure, economic opportunity, and technological capacity matter, but so do water memories, neighbourhood knowledge, dignified work, and the right to participate in the remaking of place. Munif and Alem show that a future becomes fragile when it is built by erasing the witnesses to its foundations. Their novels invite a more durable ambition: development capable of remembering, listening, and repairing.

Funding:

The author extends their appreciation to Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University for funding this research work through the Project number (PSAU/2026/02/39758).

Declarations

Data availability: The article analyses public institutional webpages. The source register and representative Romanized excerpts are included. A reusable corpus should be archived only after checking institutional copyright, webpage changes, and journal data-sharing requirements.

Ethics: The corpus contains no private or personal data. Institutional texts are quoted briefly for scholarly analysis.

Conflict of interest: No conflict of interest is declared.

Author contribution note: The manuscript is a research-development draft. Before submission, the named author should verify all primary pages, add independent second coding, and adapt formatting and disclosure statements to the target journal.

References

- Alem, R. (2016). *The dove's necklace* (K. Halls & A. Talib, Trans.). Overlook Press. (Original work published 2010).
- Alaimo, S. (2010). *Bodily natures: Science, environment, and the material self*. Indiana University Press.
- Al-Raddadi, R. (2022). The aesthetics of the oppressed: Oil and capitalism in Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 68(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2022.0001>
- Barrett, R., & Worden, D. (2012). Oil culture: Guest editors' introduction. *Journal of American Studies*, 46(2), 269–272. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875812000163>
- Buell, L. (1995). *The environmental imagination: Thoreau, nature writing, and the formation of American culture*. Harvard University Press.
- Buell, L. (2001). *Writing for an endangered world: Literature, culture, and environment in the U.S. and beyond*. Harvard University Press.
- DeLoughrey, E., & Handley, G. B. (Eds.). (2011). *Postcolonial ecologies: Literatures of the environment*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780195394429.001.0001>
- Fuccaro, N. (2001). Visions of the city: Urban studies on the Gulf. *Review of Middle East Studies*, 35(2), 175–187. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026318400043339>
- Heise, U. K. (2008). *Sense of place and sense of planet: The environmental imagination of the global*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195335637.001.0001>
- Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. (2016). *Saudi Vision 2030*. <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/>
- LeMenager, S. (2014). *Living oil: Petroleum culture in the American century*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199899425.001.0001>
- Munif, A. (1989). *Cities of salt* (P. Theroux, Trans.). Vintage International. (Original work published 1984).
- Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674061194>
- Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2017). *Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds*. University of Minnesota Press. <https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9781517900649.001.0001>
- Saudi Green Initiative. (n.d.). About Saudi Green Initiative. <https://www.sgi.gov.sa/about-sgi/>
- Swyngedouw, E. (2004). *Social power and the urbanization of water: Flows of power*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198233916.001.0001>
- Tronto, J. C. (1993). *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. Routledge.
- United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>
- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (n.d.). Goal 4: Quality education. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>
- Yaeger, P. (2011). Literature in the ages of wood, tallow, coal, whale oil, gasoline, atomic power, and other energy sources. *PMLA*, 126(2), 305–326. <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.2.305>