

Exploring Salinity Stress Effects in Cotton: A Review of Genetic and Molecular Approaches

Muhammad Nouman Khalid* and Ifrah Amjad

Department of Plant Breeding and Genetics, University of Agriculture Faisalabad, Pakistan

*Corresponding Author E-mail: noumankhalidpbg@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Salinity stress significantly impacts cotton productivity, necessitating comprehensive research into the effects and potential mitigation strategies. This systematic review thoroughly examines the impacts of salinity stress on cotton plants, discussing physiological, biochemical, and molecular responses. Several breeding and biotechnological approaches are evaluated, and relevant case studies are included to offer context-specific insights. While challenges and limitations in developing salt-tolerant cotton are acknowledged, the review emphasizes the promise of continued research and development in this area.

Keywords: Cotton, Salinity.

INTRODUCTION

Background on Cotton and Salinity Stress
Cotton, a vital crop globally, faces significant threats from salinity stress. Understanding the impacts of salinity stress is crucial as a leading cause of productivity loss in cotton. The effects span physiological changes, molecular responses, and alterations in nutrient uptake and metabolism (Zafar & Shakeel et al., 2022). Importance of Studying Salinity Stress in Cotton
Increasing soil salinity worldwide underscores the importance of studying salinity stress in cotton. To secure future cotton production, it is critical to develop cotton varieties with improved salt tolerance and understand the mechanisms underpinning this tolerance (Zafar & Razzaq et al., 2022).

Major Salts that Cause Salinity in Cotton Plants

Sodium Chloride (NaCl) Impact

Sodium chloride is one of the most common salts found in saline soils, and it has several harmful effects on cotton plants. Excessive NaCl in the soil can lead to an influx of sodium (Na⁺) and chloride (Cl⁻) ions into the plant cells, causing ionic toxicity. Sodium ions can disrupt potassium (K⁺) uptake, leading to a K⁺/Na⁺ imbalance that affects various cellular functions, including enzyme activities and protein synthesis. While essential in small amounts, chloride ions can become toxic at high concentrations, potentially interfering with photosynthesis and other metabolic processes.

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Additionally, the high osmotic pressure caused by NaCl can make it harder for the plant roots to take up water, leading to water stress (Dong et al., 2014).

Magnesium Sulphate (MgSO₄) Impact

Magnesium sulphate, another salt often found in saline soils, can also cause issues for cotton plants. While magnesium (Mg²⁺) is an essential plant nutrient, in excess, it can interfere with the uptake of other cations, such as calcium (Ca²⁺) and potassium (K⁺), leading to nutritional imbalances. High concentrations of sulphate (SO₄²⁻) ions can contribute to high osmotic pressure, exacerbating water stress. The combined effect of high Mg²⁺ and SO₄²⁻ can impair plant growth and development and ultimately reduce cotton yield (Ren et al., 2022).

Sodium Bicarbonate (NaHCO₃) and Sodium Carbonate (Na₂CO₃) Impact

Sodium bicarbonate and sodium carbonate salts are particularly problematic in alkaline saline soils. These salts can increase soil pH to levels that are detrimental to cotton plants, affecting nutrient availability and microbial activity in the soil. Additionally, these salts' sodium ions (Na⁺) can lead to sodicity issues, including poor soil structure, reduced water infiltration, and physical damage to plant roots. The high pH can also cause imbalances in nutrient uptake, with certain nutrients becoming less available under alkaline conditions. This can lead to nutrient deficiencies, further impairing cotton growth and productivity (Fan et al., 2021).

Effect of Salinity Stress on Cotton Plant Growth

Reduced Plant Growth and Yield

Salinity stress significantly impacts the overall growth and productivity of cotton plants. High salinity can reduce plant height, leaf area, number of bolls, and overall biomass, all of which can contribute to reduced cotton yield. Saline conditions cause osmotic stress, which can limit water uptake, causing plants to exhibit drought-like symptoms such as wilting and stunted growth. The excess salts can also lead to nutritional imbalances, hindering the plant's ability to take up essential nutrients

from the soil, further impacting its growth and productivity (Ashfaq et al., 2015).

Physiological and Metabolic Disruptions

Exposure to high salinity causes a cascade of physiological and metabolic changes within the cotton plant. These changes are part of the plant's stress response but can also have detrimental effects. For example, high salt concentrations can lead to ionic toxicity, primarily due to the accumulation of sodium and chloride ions, which can cause cellular damage. Furthermore, salinity stress can lead to oxidative stress, where the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) exceeds the plant's antioxidant capacity, causing oxidative damage to cells. At the metabolic level, salinity can disrupt various metabolic processes, including photosynthesis, protein synthesis, and energy metabolism, impairing the plant's growth and development (Ju et al., 2021).

Altered Gene Expression and Signal Transduction

Salinity stress can also alter gene expression in cotton plants, affecting various signal transduction pathways and regulatory networks. These genetic changes form part of the plant's response to salinity stress, with many genes being upregulated or downregulated in response to high salt conditions. These genes can be involved in a wide range of functions, from ion transport and osmotic adjustment to stress signal transduction and the production of stress-related proteins. While these changes can help the plant cope with salinity stress to some extent, they can also disrupt normal cellular functions and contribute to the negative effects of salinity on the plant's growth and development (Xu et al., 2020).

The Genetic Basis of Salt Tolerance

Genes Associated with Salt Tolerance:

Explain that certain genes that confer salt tolerance in cotton have been identified. These genes might be involved in regulating physiological processes like ion transport, osmotic adjustment, and stress signalling. Include information on identifying these genes

(e.g., through genome sequencing or genetic linkage studies) (Sun et al., 2018).

Genetic Mechanisms Underlying Salt Tolerance:

Describe the proposed mechanisms for how these genes increase salt tolerance. For example, some genes might code for proteins that help maintain ion balance under saline conditions, while others might activate protective metabolic pathways during salt stress (Ashraf, 2002).

Implications of the Genetic Basis of Salt Tolerance

Improving Salt Tolerance Through Breeding:

Discuss how understanding the genetic basis of salt tolerance can guide selective breeding programs. Breeders can select for cotton varieties that carry salt-tolerant genes to improve overall crop resistance to salinity (Ma et al., 2011).

Potential for Genetic Modification:

Discuss the potential of genetic engineering to improve salt tolerance in cotton. For instance, genes known to confer salt tolerance could be inserted into cotton varieties that produce high yields but are currently sensitive to salinity (Desingh & Kanagaraj, 2007).

Challenges in Utilizing Genetic Information:

Outline some of the difficulties in using this genetic knowledge in practical applications. This might include technical challenges in breeding or genetic modification and potential ecological or socio-economic impacts (Abdelraheem et al., 2019).

Future Research Directions:

Highlight areas where further research is needed. This could involve identifying additional salt-tolerance genes, better understanding salt tolerance mechanisms, or developing more efficient methods to apply this genetic knowledge in the field.

Conventional Breeding Approaches

Selection and Breeding of Salt-Tolerant Varieties:

This involves identifying cotton varieties that exhibit higher salt tolerance then using these in breeding programs to produce more salt-

tolerant progeny. These varieties might be identified through field testing under saline conditions or by screening a range of varieties in a controlled environment (Yasir et al., 2019).

Hybridization:

Hybridization involves crossing two different varieties to combine desirable traits from both. In this case, a salt-tolerant variety could be crossed with a high-yielding variety to create a hybrid that has both traits (Wang et al., 2015).

Marker-Assisted Breeding

Quantitative Trait Loci (QTL) Mapping:

This technique identifies areas of the genome that are associated with salt tolerance. Once these QTLs are identified, markers can be developed that allow breeders to select for these traits more accurately in breeding programs (Zhang et al., 2022).

Marker-Assisted Selection (MAS):

Using markers associated with salt tolerance, breeders can screen a large number of plants quickly, selecting only those that carry the desirable genes for further breeding. This can speed up the process of developing salt-tolerant varieties (Subramanyam et al., 2012).

Biotechnological Approaches

Genetic Engineering: This involves inserting one or more genes known to confer salt tolerance directly into the cotton plant's genome. These genes could come from a different variety of cotton or even a different species altogether (Poortavakoli et al., 2017).

Genome Editing:

Techniques like CRISPR/Cas9 allow scientists to edit the cotton plant's genome directly, potentially enhancing its natural salt tolerance mechanisms. For example, if a gene that negatively affects salt tolerance when active has been identified, genome editing could be used to "turn off" this gene (Ye et al., 2009).

Transcriptomics, Proteomics, and Metabolomics:

These "-omics" technologies allow scientists to study how the cotton plant's gene expression, protein production, and metabolic processes change under saline conditions. This information can then be used to identify

potential targets for genetic engineering or genome editing (Castillo & Dever, 2011).

Challenges and Future Perspectives

Despite these advanced techniques, developing salt-tolerant cotton varieties is still a challenge due to the complexity of salt-tolerance traits and the potential trade-offs with other important traits like yield and fiber quality. Further research is needed to better understand salt tolerance's genetic and physiological basis, refine current breeding and biotechnological approaches, and develop new strategies.

Case Studies on Genetic and Molecular Approaches for Salt Tolerance in cotton

Identifying Salt-Tolerant Genotypes:

A case study might involve field trials to screen a diverse set of cotton genotypes for salt tolerance under saline field conditions. Researchers would observe growth, yield, and physiological traits to identify promising salt-tolerant genotypes (Guo et al., 2009).

Molecular Markers for Salt Tolerance:

In another case, researchers could conduct genetic mapping studies to identify molecular markers associated with salt tolerance in cotton. They might cross a salt-tolerant variety with a salt-sensitive one, generate a mapping population, and use this to find regions of the genome (Quantitative Trait Loci or QTL) linked to salt tolerance (Noormohammadi et al., 2020).

Genome-Wide Association Study (GWAS) of Salt Tolerance:

Another study might perform a GWAS on a panel of diverse cotton accessions, using phenotypic data on salt tolerance and genotypic data from whole-genome sequencing. This could help identify specific genes or genetic variants associated with salt tolerance (Jiang et al., 2006).

Genetic Engineering for Salt Tolerance:

A case study might describe how researchers have genetically engineered cotton to improve salt tolerance. They could insert a gene known to confer salt tolerance (such as a gene coding for a salt-tolerant ion transporter protein) and evaluate the resulting plants for salt tolerance and yield under saline conditions (Zhang & Rahman, 2021).

CRISPR/Cas9-Mediated Genome Editing for Salt Tolerance:

A fifth case study might involve using the CRISPR/Cas9 genome editing system to increase salt tolerance in cotton. For example, researchers could use CRISPR to knock out a gene known to negatively affect salt tolerance when active, and then assess how this affects the plants' performance under salt stress (He et al., 2020).

Challenges and Limitations in Developing Salt-tolerant Cotton Varieties

Complexity of Salinity Tolerance:

Salinity tolerance is a complex trait controlled by many genes and influenced by various environmental factors. Understanding and manipulating these many components is a significant challenge (Brugnoli & Lauteri, 1991).

Lack of High-Quality Genetic Resources:

A limited genetic base of commercially grown cotton varieties can restrict the availability of salt-tolerance genes, making it harder to breed for this trait (Wise et al., 2004).

Limited Understanding of Salt Tolerance Mechanisms:

While some mechanisms of salinity tolerance are understood, our knowledge is far from complete. This limits the ability to breed or engineer for this trait (Hudson, 2008).

Linkage Drag:

When breeding for salt tolerance, other undesirable traits may be inadvertently introduced into new cotton varieties due to genetic linkage, a phenomenon known as linkage drag (Li et al., 2020).

Pleiotropy and Epistasis:

One gene may control multiple traits (pleiotropy), or genes may interact with each other (epistasis). This can make modifying one trait (like salt tolerance) difficult without affecting others (Shahzad et al., 2022).

Trade-offs Between Salt Tolerance and Other Traits:

There might be trade-offs between salt tolerance and other important traits such as yield, fiber quality, or disease resistance, meaning improving one could potentially worsen another.

Lack of Efficient Breeding Techniques:

Traditional breeding techniques can be time-consuming and may not always produce the desired results. Marker-assisted selection can help speed up the process but relies on known markers for salt tolerance.

Regulation and Public Perception of GMOs:

Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are strictly regulated in many countries and often face public opposition. This can limit the adoption of genetically engineered salt-tolerant cotton varieties.

Influence of Growth Stage and Environment:

The impact of salt stress can vary with the cotton plant's growth stage and environmental conditions. This can make it difficult to breed or engineer consistently salt-tolerant varieties.

Climate Change and Rising Salinity:

Climate change is predicted to increase soil salinity in many cotton-growing regions. This escalating challenge may make it difficult for breeding and biotechnological advancements to keep pace.

Future Perspectives**Advanced Genomics and Breeding Approaches**

With the advancement in genomics, we can anticipate that more and more genetic factors controlling salinity tolerance will be uncovered. High-throughput sequencing technologies and advanced bioinformatics tools have made it possible to sequence and analyze genomes more quickly and accurately than ever before. Genome-wide association studies (GWAS) and next-generation sequencing (NGS) technologies, for instance, will enable us to pinpoint salt-tolerance genes and associated markers more precisely. Additionally, the development and refinement of marker-assisted selection (MAS) and genomic selection (GS) strategies will expedite the breeding process and enhance the precision of breeding for complex traits like salinity tolerance. Also, the development of multi-parent advanced generation intercross (MAGIC) populations and nested association mapping (NAM) populations will facilitate the

dissection of complex traits and the introduction of novel variability into cotton breeding programs (Shahzad et al., 2022).

Biotechnological Innovations

Biotechnology has a significant role to play in the future of cotton salinity tolerance. With continuous advancements in genetic engineering techniques, more salt-tolerant transgenic cotton lines are expected to be produced. Researchers can engineer cotton plants to overexpress genes that are known to confer salt tolerance, or they can use gene silencing techniques to inhibit the expression of genes that negatively affect salt tolerance. New gene-editing technologies like CRISPR-Cas9 offer even more possibilities, as they allow specific genes to be modified with unprecedented precision. In addition, advancements in tissue culture and transformation protocols will facilitate the development of genetically modified cotton (Yang et al., 2020).

Systems Biology and Omics Technologies

The future perspective of understanding and combating cotton salinity stress lies in a systems biology approach where comprehensive and integrative analyses are performed using multi-omics data. Technologies such as transcriptomics, proteomics, metabolomics, and ionomics can provide a holistic view of how cotton plants respond to salt stress at multiple levels of biological organization. When integrated and analyzed using advanced computational tools, these data can reveal novel insights into the complex mechanisms underlying salinity tolerance. More importantly, this information can guide the development of novel strategies for improving salt tolerance in cotton through breeding or biotechnology. Looking forward, the integration of multi-omics data with phenotypic, physiological, and environmental data in a systems genetics framework holds great promise for enhancing our understanding of cotton salinity tolerance and translating this knowledge into improved cotton varieties (Paterson, 2008).

Use of Salt-Tolerant Varieties and Rootstocks

Using salt-tolerant varieties is one of the most effective management strategies for salinity stress in cotton. Extensive research and breeding programs are currently being undertaken to develop varieties of cotton that can tolerate high salt conditions, producing acceptable yields even under stress. This includes both conventional breeding and genetic modification techniques. Additionally, grafting cotton onto salt-tolerant rootstocks can help enhance the salinity tolerance of the plant. This method allows for the production of a plant that has the desired characteristics of a particular cotton variety, but with the added benefit of increased salt tolerance from the rootstock (Haigler et al., 2005).

Improved Irrigation and Drainage Systems

Appropriate water management is a key strategy for managing salinity stress in cotton. This includes careful control of irrigation to avoid excess water, which can increase soil salinity. Drip irrigation systems can be particularly effective, as they deliver water directly to the plant roots, reducing the chance of salt accumulation. In addition, effective drainage systems are crucial to prevent the buildup of saline water in the soil. Subsurface drainage systems can be used to remove excess water and reduce the salinity level of the soil, creating a more favorable environment for cotton growth (Bhardwaj et al., 2022).

Use of Soil Amendments and Conditioners

The application of certain soil amendments and conditioners can also help manage salinity stress in cotton. These substances can improve the physical and chemical properties of the soil, making it more conducive to plant growth despite high salinity levels. For example, organic matter can improve soil structure, increase water-holding capacity, and promote the growth of beneficial soil microbes. Other amendments, like gypsum (calcium sulfate), can help displace sodium ions, reducing the harmful effects of sodic soils on cotton plants (Constable et al., 2015).

CONCLUSION

Salinity stress poses significant challenges to cotton cultivation, impacting plant growth, physiological processes, and yield. To combat this, we need a multifaceted approach that includes the use of salt-tolerant varieties, enhanced breeding and biotechnological methods, improved irrigation and drainage practices, and effective soil amendments. Continued research into the genetic, molecular, and physiological aspects of salinity tolerance in cotton will play a crucial role in developing more effective strategies for managing salinity stress.

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Conflict of Interest:

There is no such evidence of conflict of interest.

Author Contribution

All authors have participated in critically revising of the entire manuscript and approval of the final manuscript.

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