Ag nanoparticles immobilized on new magnetic alginate halloysite as a recoverable catalyst for reduction of nitroaromatics in aqueous media

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Amines can be applied in the synthesis of various important compounds such as dyes, drugs, polymers, pharmaceutical products, and biologically active materials. The significant subject in the preparation of amines is the selection of the most effective heterogeneous catalyst to get the best catalytic efficiency, stability, recoverability, and reusability. For this target, we prepared new alginate magnetically recoverable nanocatalyst by stabilization of Ag nanoparticles on the surface of the halloysite (HS) [HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄]. Several detection methods confirmed the production of HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄ nanocatalyst and the results obtained were well explained in the context. HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄ presented good catalytic performance for the hydrogenation of nitro compounds using NaBH₄ as the reducing agent and hydrogen donor. The good activity and durability of this catalyst can be attributed to the good dispersion and nano-sized particle of silver nanoparticles.

The selective hydrogenation of nitro compounds to the corresponding amino compounds is one of the main synthetic processes from the industrial and academic fields because the obtained amines are commercially valuable starting materials and adaptable intermediates in the production of pharmaceuticals, rubber auxiliaries, dyestuffs, explosives, antioxidants, pesticides, agrochemicals, spices, and drugs while nitro compounds are the carcinogenic contaminants and toxic bio-refractories entered in industrial and agricultural wastewater. Therefore, finding effective methods to eliminate these pollutants is essential. In this regard, various reduction systems and catalysts have been applied for the reduction of nitro compounds. The classic method of synthesizing amine compounds is to reduce nitro compounds by metallic reagents, which resulting in considerable pollution in the environment. However, this method has various disadvantages, such as simple corrosion of equipment, environmentally hazardous, low performance, and difficulties in continuous products and their separation. Hence, synthetic processes including cheaper and clearer alternatives are required. There are several methods for the reduction of nitro compounds including chemical reduction, electro-reduction, and chemical hydrogenation. Among them, the catalytic hydrogenation of these compounds has received special attention owing to its excellent performance and selectivity. One of these methods is the use of NaBH₄ in water as a hydride source. However, reducing nitro groups with NaBH₄ in the lack of catalysts is very time-consuming and tedious, so various metal catalysts have been utilized to perform this reduction.

Recently, metal-based nanoparticles synthesized via the green process without any stabilization agent are broadly employed in heterogeneous and homogeneous catalysis systems because of their particular structures and characteristics. The use of metal nanoparticles as the nanocatalyst in the presence of NaBH₄ as a hydride donor is an eco-friendly approach for the hydrogenation of nitro compounds because this reaction can be done under moderate conditions without acid sewage. Among metallic nanoparticles, silver nanoparticles have interested very consideration due to their good catalytic activities, extremely large surface area, excellent conductivity, and high stability. Such catalytic systems provide highly effective and selective organic reactions. Although Ag nanoparticles as catalysts have various benefits, great cost, aggregation, and problems in recovery are the apparent difficulties to be faced. Nowadays, an improved approach is to deposit these nanoparticles on
appropriate supports. Since some supports are costly for practical application, hence, finding affordable and accessible support is necessary.

Halloysite (HS) has the potential to be used as a catalyst carrier to inhibit the aggregation of silver nanoparticles. HS with a formula Al₂Si₂O₅(OH)₄·nH₂O (n = 0, 2) is naturally existing in soils and weathered rocks. It is a clay mineral having a hollow tubular structure with a multi-layer wall in the nanometer range (lengths of 300 ~ 900 nm, inside diameters of 10 ~ 25 nm, and outside diameters of 50 ~ 100 nm) and a high specific surface area. As well as HS owns many reactive groups on inside and outside surfaces. In comparison with other tubular nanostructures e.g. carbon nanotubes, HS is eco-friendly, biocompatible, and cost-effective. Due to its high specific surface area and hollow structure, HS can serve as promising support for various applications. HS has been investigated as high-efficiency support for various nanoparticle such as Pd, ZnO, TiO₂, Au, and Ag resulting in effective catalyzes with adjustable properties.

In recent years, polysaccharides including chitosan, gelatin, and alginate are investigated as a most appropriate substrate for metal nanoparticles owing to their biocompatible, biodegradable, rheological, and non-toxic features. Among them, alginate is a non-toxic and anionic compound, naturally existing in bacteria and brown algae. Its polysaccharide chain contains β-D-mannuronate (M) and α-L-guluronate (G), linearly linked by 1,4-glycosidic units. Moreover, there are abundant of hydroxyl and carboxyl groups in this macromolecule which can be suitably connected to other compounds.

Over the last years, magnetic nanoparticles (e.g. Fe₃O₄) have been broadly studied as a suitable compound for the separation of compounds in numerous biological and industrial fields. Their magnetic property are them effectively and readily separated from the reaction media by using an external magnet.

In this study, we describe the synthesis of Ag nanoparticles stabilized on new alginate magnetic halloysite and it was also investigated for its catalytic activity in hydrogenation of nitro aromatic compounds with NaBH₄ as a mild hydride donor. It is found that the as-synthesized HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄ can be used as a new, reusable and efficient nanocatalyst for the reduction of nitro aromatic compounds into the target amine derivatives. To the best of our knowledge, HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄ has not been reported as the nanocatalyst for the reduction of nitro aromatic compounds so far.

**Experimental**

**Materials and instruments.** All the chemical material and solvents such as acetonitrile (CH₃CN, 99%), ethanol (CH₃CH₂OH, 96%), dichloromethane (CH₂Cl₂, 99%), N, N-Dimethylformamid (HCON(CH₃)₂, DMF, 99.8%), and ammonia solution (NH₄OH, 25%) were used with high purity from Merck. The required chemicals such as iron (III) chloride and iron (II) (FeCl₃.6H₂O, 97% and FeCl₂.4H₂O, 99%), Sodium borohydride (NaBH₄, 98%), silver nitrate (AgNO₃, 99%), halloysite, alginate, and nitroaromatic derivations were prepared from Sigma-Aldrich.

For determining the crystalline and phase structure of the synthesized nanocomposite, Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) imaging was performed with a CM30, Philips, Germany operating at 300 kV. Field emission scanning electron microscopy (FESEM) images equipped with an EDS attachment were taken on VEGA3, Tescan, USA. X-ray diffraction patterns were obtained on a PW 1800 X-ray diffractometer (Philips, Netherlands) with Cu Ka radiation (λ = 0.154056 nm). Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectra were recorded using an FTIR apparatus (SHIMADZU, Japan) and in the range of 4000–400 cm⁻¹.

**Synthesis of HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄ nanocatalyst.** The synthesis of HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄ nanocomposites involves several steps as follows (Fig. 1):

(a) Synthesis of Hs-Fe₃O₄: The 2.5 g of the HS was dispersed in 120 mL of deionized water for 15 min. Then, iron (III) chloride (1.37 g) and iron (II) (0.5 g) were added to the above suspension. This suspension was stirred at 70 °C under an N₂ atmosphere. Then, 11 mL of concentrated ammonia was added to the above mixture and stirred for one hour. At the completion of the reaction, the product by an external magnet was separated, washed 3 times with distillated water, and dried at room temperature.

(b) Synthesis of HS-Alginate/Fe₃O₄: In this stage, 500 mg of halloysite/Fe₃O₄ in 60 mL was dispersed in water for 20 min. Then 100 mg of alginate was added to the above solution and stirred for 5 h. Finally, the precipitation by using an external magnet was separated, washed 3 times with distillated water, and dried at room temperature.

(c) Synthesis of HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄: At first, 500 mg of HS-Alginate/Fe₃O₄ in 50 mL of water was stirred for 90 min at 25 °C, and then 1.4 mmol AgNO₃ was added to the above mixture. In the next step, 0.25 mL of hydrazine hydrate in 1 mL of distilled water was added dropwise to the above solution and stirred at 25 °C for overnight. Subsequently, the precipitation by a magnet was isolated and washed three times with distilled water, and dried completely.

**The procedure for reduction of nitro aromatic compounds.** To a round bottomed flask containing nitro compound (1 mmol) and 5 mL H₂O, 0.03 g catalyst was added and the mixture was vigorously stirred at room temperature. Then NaBH₄ was added to the suspension and the reaction temperature was raised to 50 °C. After completion of the reaction (monitored by TLC), the catalyst by an external magnetic was separated and then the precipitate was recrystallized from EtOH to give pure products (Table 2).
Result and discussion

Catalyst formation verification. XRD analyses authenticate the Fe3O4 nanoparticles and HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe3O4 nanocomposite as presented in Fig. 2. As shown in Fig. 2a, the diffraction peaks at 30.79°, 36.14°, 44.09°, 57.89°, and 63.04° corresponding to the Fe3O4 nanoparticles interlayer spacing (220), (311), (400), (511), and (440) reflection plane, respectively. In Fig. 2b, in addition to peaks related to Fe3O4 nanoparticles, the diffraction peaks at 2θ = 12.74°, 20.84°, 25.24°, and 55.84° correspond to the HS interlayer spacing (001), (110), (002), and (114) reflection plane, respectively. In addition, the diffraction peaks at 38.54°, 44.09°, 63.04°, and 78.09°, correspond to the Ag nanoparticles interlayer spacing (111), (200), (220), and (311) reflection plane, respectively.

FTIR spectra of HS /Fe3O4, HS-Alginate/Fe3O4, and HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe3O4 were recorded, Fig. 3. In the FTIR spectrum of HS/Fe3O4 (Fig. 3a), the typical adsorption peaks of Si–O stretching located at 1091 cm⁻¹. The vibrations at 534 cm⁻¹ are assigned to the Al–O–Si group. In addition, the absorption bands at 3695 cm⁻¹ and 3624 cm⁻¹ are ascribed to vibrations of the inner-surface hydroxyl groups. And two apparent peaks at 585, and 635 cm⁻¹ were assigned to the stretching vibration of the Fe–O groups in the Fe3O4 units. In addition to the characteristic peaks of HS and Fe3O4, the FTIR spectra of HS-Alginate /Fe3O4 (Fig. 3b) present the notable peak at 1640 cm⁻¹ is owing to the C=O stretching of the alginic acid unit, as well as the peak at 2978 cm⁻¹, can be attributed to the C–H stretching vibrations from the alginate backbone. In the FTIR spectrum of HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe3O4, the FTIR spectra of HS-Alginate /Fe3O4 (Fig. 3b) present the notable peak at 1640 cm⁻¹ is owing to the C=O stretching of the alginic acid unit, as well as the peak at 2978 cm⁻¹, can be attributed to the C–H stretching vibrations from the alginate backbone.
Fe₃O₄ nanocomposite, all of the typical peaks of HS, alginate, and Fe₃O₄ can be definitely distinguished, such as the C–O and –OH vibrations, and Si–O, Al–O–H stretching vibrations (Fig. 3c). However, several shifts are also observed. These shifts can be recognized as an indication that the hydroxyl and carboxyl groups are responsible for the Ag nanoparticle stabilization.

The morphology and chemical composition of HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄ were determined through FESEM, EDS, mapping, and TEM. As shown in Figs. 4 and 5 it was clear that HS has a diameter in the range of 41–52 nm, and the HS nanotubes were open-ended. In the FESEM image, it can be revealed some roughness on the surface of HS owing to grafted alginate. Also, the HS structures have a slight agglomeration. However, it showed that its surface morphology does not change very in the presence of Fe₃O₄ and Ag (Fig. 4a). As can be observed in Fig. 5, the HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄ nanocatalyst has an almost uniform size distribution. The EDS (Fig. 4b) represented that the constituents for the HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄ were Al, Si, O, Ag, C, and Fe. According to mapping (Fig. 4c), these elements were irregularly dispersed on the surface of HNTs.

Figure 2. XRD patterns of (a) Fe₃O₄, and (b) HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄ nanocomposite.

Figure 3. FTIR spectra of (a) HS-Fe₃O₄, (b) HS-Alginate /Fe₃O₄, and (c) HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄.
Figure 4. (a) FESEM images, (b) EDS, (c) Mapping of HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄.
The TEM image in Fig. 5 shows a defect in the HS surface that results in rough exterior walls, which is consistent with the FESEM image. The strong interaction of the polymer between the substrate (halloysite) and the nanoparticles, especially the Fe₃O₄ nanoparticles due to the carboxylic acid functional groups, as well as the flexibility of the polymer, has caused the nanoparticle and polymer images to be seen as mixtures that are almost far apart. This could be because polymers are also present between halloysites.

Investigation of the catalytic activity of HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄. Subsequently, hydrogenation of nitrobenzene was selected as the model reaction to investigate the catalytic activity of the HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄. Therefore, the model reaction was firstly tested in the presence of (0.04 g) at 70 °C in H₂O as solvent that was mild and environmentally benign conditions. Such conditions gave aniline in 50% yields after 1 h. To improve the yield of model reaction and decrease its time, the used solvent, the amount of HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄, and the temperature were changed. It was found that running the reaction at ambient temperature gives the desired products in higher yields. By studying more temperatures, 50 °C was chosen as the optimized reaction temperature. Accordingly, by investigating the amounts of HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄, it was found that the optimized amount is 0.04 g HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄ and further escalation didn’t increase the product yield. Furthermore, among the tested solvents, water was the best one. Under the optimized conditions, hydrogenation of nitrobenzene gave anilines in 100% yields, respectively, after 30 min (Table 1, entry 7).

Table 1. Optimization conditions for reduction of nitro aromatic compounds. Bold indicates the optimal values of the reaction conditions

| Entry | Catalyst amount (g) | solvent | Temperature (°C) | Time (min) | Yield (%) |
|-------|---------------------|---------|------------------|-----------|-----------|
| 1     | 0.04                | CH₃CN   | 50               | 40        | 10        |
| 2     | 0.04                | CH₂Cl₂  | Reflux           | 45        | Trace     |
| 3     | 0.04                | DMF     | 50               | 40        | 10        |
| 4     | 0.04                | EtOH    | 50               | 30        | 70        |
| 5     | 0.04                | H₂O     | Reflux           | 30        | 85        |
| 6     | 0.04                | H₂O     | 70               | 35        | 70        |
| 7     | 0.04                | H₂O     | 50               | 30        | 100       |
| 8     | 0.04                | H₂O     | r.t              | 45        | 45        |
| 9     | 0.03                | H₂O     | 50               | 30        | 95        |
| 10    | 0.05                | H₂O     | 50               | 30        | 100       |
The generality of this protocol was then examined using different starting materials to produce various aromatic amines. The results confirmed that HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄ can catalyze the hydrogenation reaction of all applied substrates to give the corresponding amine compounds at short reaction times and in high efficiencies (Table 2).

### Kinetic study.

The catalytic reduction of 4-nitrophenol was selected as a model reaction to appraise the catalytic activity of the HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄ nanocatalysts. UV–Vis absorption spectra were used to monitor the concentration changes. The kinetics of this reaction was investigated with HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄ nanocatalyst. It followed the pseudo-first-order kinetics concerning the concentration of 4-nitrophenol as follows:

\[
\ln \left( \frac{C_t}{C_0} \right) = -kt
\]

where \( C_t \) and \( C_0 \) are the 4-nitrophenol concentrations at time \( t \) and at the beginning time, respectively, and \( k \) is the apparent rate constant. The plot of \( \ln (C_t / C_0) \) vs time was obtained and a good linear correlation was observed (0.99). This phenomenon also showed that this reaction followed pseudo-first-order kinetics. From the slope of this equation, the apparent rate constant (K) for the reduction of 4-nitrophenol was obtained of 0.047 s⁻¹.⁴¹,⁴²

### Study of reusability.

The results obtained from the reusability evaluation of HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄ in the model reaction are as follows. By completion of each cycle, the catalyst was separated, rinsed with EtOH, dried and reused in the next cycle. As shown by the results in Fig. 6, recycling the catalyst up to 6 runs showed no important loss of its catalytic activity. Since the catalyst contains magnetic Fe₃O₄ nanoparticles, it is easily sepa-

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Table 2. Reduction of aromatic nitro compounds in the presence of HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄ and NaBH₄.

| Entry | Product | Time (min) | Yield (%) | Melting point (Abs./Lit.) |
|-------|---------|------------|-----------|-------------------------|
| 1     | H₂N–NH₂  | 25         | 100       | 143–144/145–147         |
| 2     | H₂N–NH₂  | 32         | 99        | 100–103/102–104         |
| 3     | H₂N–NH₂  | 30         | 100       | 187/184 (boiling point) |
| 4     | H₂NHN–NH₂| 60         | 92        | 18–19/19–20             |
| 5     | HO–NH₂   | 60         | 90        | 187/186–190             |
| 6     | HO–NH₂   | 30         | 100       | 78/77–79                |
| 7     | HO–NH₂   | 35         | 100       | 29–30/28–30             |
| 8     | HOOC–NH₂ | 120        | 95        | 180/187–189             |
| 9     | C₇H₇–NH₂ | 40         | 96        | 20–21/19–20             |

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The generality of this protocol was then examined using different starting materials to produce various aromatic amines. The results confirmed that HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄ can catalyze the hydrogenation reaction of all applied substrates to give the corresponding amine compounds at short reaction times and in high efficiencies (Table 2).
rated from the reaction mixture by an external magnetic field. Now, after six times of recovery, observing good efficiency as well as ICP (Ag content: 1.2% to 1.1% after 6 times) results showed that the catalyst has good magnetic properties and high stability.

Conclusions

The construction of cost-effective and reusable catalytic systems by using low-priced compounds and simple methods is an attractive research field for organic chemists. This study focused on the modification of halloysite material through three strategies including doping of alginate, deposition of silver nanoparticles, and Fe₃O₄ dispersion on the support surface which was synthesized for the first time. The as-prepared HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄ was utilized as a suitable and recoverable nanocatalyst for the reduction of nitro aromatic compounds to the related amine compounds. The obtained HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄ nanocatalyst presented a good performance in the reduction of nitro aromatic compounds to the amine aromatic compounds for a broad range of materials under moderate conditions. Recycling experiment of HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄ was performed using water as a green solvent and NaBH₄ as a hydrogen donor. This heterogeneous HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄ nanocatalyst exhibited acceptable stability and recovered by a magnet and reutilized several times with a low decrease in its efficiency.

Received: 9 January 2021; Accepted: 10 August 2021
Published online: 24 August 2021

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Figure 6. Reusability test of the HS-Alginate-Ag/Fe₃O₄ for model reaction.
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Acknowledgements
The authors appreciate Alzahra University for full support.

Author contributions
P.M.: Visualization, Writing original draft, Formal analysis. M.H.: Funding acquisition, Methodology, Supervision. M.D.: Methodology.

Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

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