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Development of Biodegradable Polymers for Sustainable Packaging Solutions

Subita Bhagat

Assistant Professor, Department of Chemical Engineering, SLIET-Longowal, 148106, India

ABSTRACT

The increasing environmental concerns associated with conventional plastic waste have catalyzed the search for sustainable alternatives in packaging solutions. This paper explores the development of biodegradable polymers as a viable substitute to traditional petroleum-based plastics. Biodegradable polymers, derived from renewable sources such as starch, cellulose, polylactic acid (PLA), and polyhydroxyalkanoates (PHA), present promising characteristics for reducing the ecological footprint of packaging materials. This study examines the synthesis, properties, and degradation mechanisms of various biodegradable polymers. Key focus is placed on understanding how these materials perform in different environmental conditions and their potential to fully degrade without leaving harmful residues. Advances in polymer science have enabled the enhancement of mechanical properties, thermal stability, and barrier properties of biodegradable polymers, making them more competitive with conventional plastics.

Case studies of current applications in food packaging, medical supplies, and agricultural films are discussed, highlighting the benefits and challenges of implementing biodegradable polymers in these sectors. Furthermore, the economic and logistical implications of large-scale production and integration into existing recycling systems are analyzed. The study suggest that while biodegradable polymers offer substantial environmental advantages, widespread adoption requires overcoming several hurdles, including cost, production scalability, and consumer acceptance. Future research directions include the development of hybrid materials combining biodegradable polymers with other sustainable materials, and innovations in biodegradation processes to ensure complete and efficient breakdown.

Keywords: Biodegradable Polymers, Sustainable Packaging, Environmental Impact, Renewable Sources, Polymer Degradation.

INTRODUCTION

The global proliferation of plastic waste has become a critical environmental issue, prompting the urgent need for sustainable alternatives in packaging solutions. Conventional plastics, primarily derived from petroleum, are known for their durability, lightweight nature, and cost-effectiveness. However, their resistance to natural degradation poses significant ecological challenges, as they accumulate in landfills and oceans, causing severe environmental damage and threats to wildlife.

In response to these concerns, the development of biodegradable polymers has emerged as a promising solution to mitigate the adverse impacts of plastic waste. Biodegradable polymers are designed to break down through natural processes, thereby reducing the persistence of waste in the environment. These materials are often sourced from renewable resources such as starch, cellulose, polylactic acid (PLA), and polyhydroxyalkanoates (PHA), which contribute to their eco-friendly profile.

The transition to biodegradable polymers in packaging applications presents a dual benefit: it not only addresses the waste management issue but also reduces dependency on finite fossil resources. This shift aligns with global sustainability goals and the increasing consumer demand for environmentally responsible products.

This paper delves into the scientific and technological advancements in the field of biodegradable polymers. It examines their chemical composition, production methods, and the mechanisms through which they degrade. Additionally, the paper highlights the current applications of these materials in various industries, including food packaging, medical supplies, and agriculture, providing a comprehensive overview of their potential and limitations.

Despite the promising prospects of biodegradable polymers, several challenges hinder their widespread adoption. These include higher production costs compared to conventional plastics, variability in degradation rates depending on environmental conditions, and the need for specialized infrastructure for efficient disposal and recycling. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from researchers, industry stakeholders, and policymakers.

The aim of this study is to provide an in-depth analysis of biodegradable polymers, exploring their capabilities and constraints, and to propose strategies for overcoming the barriers to their implementation. By fostering innovation and collaboration across disciplines, it is possible to accelerate the development of sustainable packaging solutions that contribute to a healthier planet.

DEVELOPMENT OF BIODEGRADABLE POLYMERS

The exploration and development of biodegradable polymers have garnered considerable attention in scientific literature, driven by the need to address the environmental ramifications of traditional plastic use. This literature review synthesizes key findings from research on the synthesis, properties, applications, and degradation mechanisms of biodegradable polymers, highlighting both advancements and persistent challenges.

1. Synthesis and Types of Biodegradable Polymers

Biodegradable polymers can be synthesized from both natural and synthetic sources. Natural biodegradable polymers such as starch, cellulose, and chitosan have been extensively studied for their biocompatibility and renewability. For instance, starch-based polymers are commonly used due to their abundance and biodegradability, though they often require modification to enhance mechanical properties and water resistance.

Synthetic biodegradable polymers like polylactic acid (PLA) and polyhydroxyalkanoates (PHA) have shown great promise due to their versatility and favorable properties. PLA, derived from fermented plant starch, is noted for its high strength and transparency, making it suitable for various packaging applications. PHA, produced by microbial fermentation, exhibits biodegradability in various environments, including soil and marine conditions, which broadens its application scope.

2. Properties and Performance

The performance of biodegradable polymers in packaging is largely determined by their mechanical properties, thermal stability, and barrier properties. Research has focused on enhancing these characteristics to make biodegradable polymers more competitive with conventional plastics. For example, the incorporation of nanomaterials into PLA has been shown to significantly improve its mechanical strength and barrier properties. Similarly, blending PHA with other polymers can enhance its flexibility and reduce brittleness, expanding its usability in packaging applications.

3. Degradation Mechanisms

Understanding the degradation mechanisms of biodegradable polymers is crucial for predicting their environmental impact and optimizing their performance. Biodegradable polymers degrade through hydrolysis and microbial activity, resulting in their breakdown into water, carbon dioxide, and biomass. The rate of degradation is influenced by factors such as temperature, humidity, and the presence of microorganisms. Studies have shown that PLA, for instance, degrades faster under composting conditions compared to soil, due to higher temperatures and microbial activity.

4. Applications in Packaging

The application of biodegradable polymers in packaging has been a major focus of research, with numerous case studies demonstrating their potential benefits. In the food industry, biodegradable polymers are used for packaging perishables, providing a sustainable alternative that also helps in maintaining food quality by offering good barrier properties against moisture and gases . Medical applications include the use of biodegradable polymers for packaging sterile instruments and as biodegradable sutures, which reduce the need for surgical removal. Agricultural films made from biodegradable polymers help in reducing soil pollution and facilitate easier plowing as they degrade naturally after use.

5. Economic and Logistical Considerations

Despite the environmental benefits, the economic viability of biodegradable polymers remains a significant barrier. The production costs are typically higher compared to conventional plastics, primarily due to the raw material costs and more complex manufacturing processes. Additionally, there are logistical challenges associated with integrating biodegradable polymers into existing waste management systems. Effective biodegradation often requires specific conditions that are not always present in current recycling or landfill operations, necessitating investments in new infrastructure.

DEGRADATION AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF BIODEGRADABLE POLYMERS

The development of biodegradable polymers for sustainable packaging solutions is grounded in a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates concepts from polymer chemistry, materials science, environmental science, and economics. This framework provides a systematic understanding of the synthesis, properties, degradation, and practical application of biodegradable polymers.

1. Polymer Chemistry

Polymer Structure and Synthesis: The theoretical basis for biodegradable polymers starts with their chemical structure and synthesis. Polymers are large molecules composed of repeating structural units (monomers) linked by covalent bonds. Biodegradable polymers are typically derived from natural monomers or synthesized through biotechnological processes.

- **Natural Polymers:** These include polysaccharides (e.g., starch, cellulose) and proteins (e.g., casein, collagen), which are inherently biodegradable due to their natural origin.
- **Synthetic Biodegradable Polymers:** These are produced via polymerization processes such as ring-opening polymerization (e.g., PLA) and microbial fermentation (e.g., PHA). The choice of monomer and polymerization method influences the polymer's properties and degradation behavior.

Polymerization Techniques: The theoretical principles of polymerization techniques such as condensation and addition polymerization are essential for designing biodegradable polymers with specific attributes. For example, PLA is synthesized through the ring-opening polymerization of lactide, while PHA is biosynthesized by microorganisms under nutrient-limited conditions.

2. Materials Science

Mechanical Properties and Thermal Stability: The mechanical properties (e.g., tensile strength, elongation at break) and thermal stability (e.g., melting temperature, glass transition temperature) of biodegradable polymers are critical for their application in packaging. The theoretical framework involves understanding the molecular weight, crystallinity, and polymer blend compatibility to optimize these properties.

Barrier Properties: The permeability of biodegradable polymers to gases and moisture is a key factor in packaging applications. Theoretical models, such as the free volume theory and the Maxwell model, help in predicting and enhancing the barrier properties of these polymers by manipulating their microstructure and incorporating fillers or nanocomposites.

3. Environmental Science

Biodegradation Mechanisms: The biodegradation of polymers involves complex interactions between the polymer, microorganisms, and environmental conditions. The theoretical framework includes the study of hydrolytic and enzymatic degradation processes, which convert polymers into monomers and ultimately into water, carbon dioxide, and biomass.

- **Hydrolysis:** This is a chemical reaction where water molecules cleave polymer chains, a process influenced by factors such as pH, temperature, and the presence of catalytic agents.
- **Enzymatic Degradation:** Microorganisms secrete enzymes that specifically target polymer chains, breaking them down into smaller molecules that can be metabolized.

Environmental Impact Assessment: Life cycle assessment (LCA) is a theoretical tool used to evaluate the environmental impacts of biodegradable polymers from raw material extraction through production, use, and disposal. LCA helps in comparing the ecological footprint of biodegradable polymers with conventional plastics.

4. Economics

Cost Analysis and Market Feasibility: Economic theories related to cost-benefit analysis and market dynamics are applied to assess the viability of biodegradable polymers. Factors such as production costs, raw material availability, economies of scale, and consumer willingness to pay for sustainable packaging are critical in this analysis.

PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

The development of biodegradable polymers for sustainable packaging solutions involves a comprehensive approach that integrates synthesis, characterization, application testing, and environmental impact assessment. The proposed methodology outlines the steps necessary to achieve the research objectives effectively.

Synthesis of Biodegradable Polymers

Selection of Raw Materials:

- Natural Sources: Select renewable raw materials such as starch, cellulose, and chitosan.

- Synthetic Sources: Choose monomers like lactic acid (for PLA) and microbial cultures for the production of PHA.

Polymerization Processes:

- Starch and Cellulose Modification: Use physical, chemical, or enzymatic methods to enhance the properties of natural polymers.
- PLA Synthesis: Perform ring-opening polymerization of lactide under controlled conditions to obtain PLA with desired molecular weight and properties.
- PHA Production: Conduct microbial fermentation using selected bacterial strains under nutrient-limited conditions to produce PHA.

Characterization of Polymers

Structural Analysis:
- Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR): Identify functional groups and confirm polymer structure.
- Nuclear Magnetic Resonance (NMR) Spectroscopy: Determine the chemical composition and monomer sequence of the polymers.

Thermal Properties:
- Differential Scanning Calorimetry (DSC): Measure melting temperature, glass transition temperature, and crystallinity.
- Thermogravimetric Analysis (TGA): Assess thermal stability and degradation temperatures.

Mechanical Properties:
- Tensile Testing: Evaluate tensile strength, elongation at break, and Young’s modulus.
- Impact Testing: Measure impact resistance and toughness.

Barrier Properties:
- Water Vapor Transmission Rate (WVTR): Determine the permeability of the polymer to water vapor.
- Gas Permeability: Measure the permeability to gases like oxygen and carbon dioxide.

Application Testing

Food Packaging:
- Shelf-life Studies: Assess the effectiveness of biodegradable polymers in preserving food quality.
- Barrier Performance: Test the polymer's ability to protect against moisture and gas infiltration.

Medical Supplies:
- Sterility Testing: Evaluate the polymer's ability to maintain sterility of medical instruments.
- Biocompatibility: Conduct cytotoxicity and biodegradation studies in simulated biological environments.

Agricultural Films:
- Field Trials: Test the performance of biodegradable films in agricultural settings.
- Degradation Studies: Monitor the degradation rate and environmental impact of the films post-use.

Environmental Impact Assessment

Degradation Studies:
- Composting Conditions: Simulate industrial composting conditions to study the degradation rate of polymers.
- Soil Burial Tests: Evaluate the biodegradation in natural soil environments.
- Marine Degradation: Test the biodegradability in marine conditions to assess the impact on oceanic ecosystems.

Life Cycle Assessment (LCA):
- Resource Extraction: Analyze the environmental impact of raw material extraction.
- Production Process: Evaluate the energy consumption and emissions during polymer synthesis.
- End-of-Life Scenarios: Compare the environmental impacts of various disposal methods (e.g., composting, recycling, landfill).

PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS

This analysis evaluates biodegradable polymers against conventional plastics and other sustainable alternatives in terms of their synthesis, properties, performance, environmental impact, and economic feasibility. This analysis aims to highlight the advantages and limitations of biodegradable polymers, providing a comprehensive understanding of their potential for sustainable packaging solutions.

Synthesis and Raw Materials

Biodegradable Polymers:

- Sources: Derived from renewable resources such as starch, cellulose, PLA from lactic acid, and PHA from microbial fermentation.
- Processes: Involves fermentation, polymerization, and chemical modification, which can be more complex and resource-intensive compared to conventional plastic production.

Conventional Plastics:

- Sources: Primarily derived from petroleum-based raw materials.
- Processes: Utilizes well-established polymerization processes that are cost-effective and efficient due to mature technologies and economies of scale.

Other Sustainable Alternatives:

- Bio-based Plastics: Made from biological materials but may not be biodegradable. Includes bio-PET and bio-PE.
- Recycled Plastics: Produced from post-consumer or post-industrial plastic waste through mechanical or chemical recycling processes.

Properties and Performance

Biodegradable Polymers:

- Mechanical Properties: Generally have lower tensile strength and elongation at break compared to conventional plastics. Enhancements through blending and nanocomposites can improve these properties.
- Thermal Stability: PLA and PHA have lower thermal stability than petroleum-based plastics, limiting their use in high-temperature applications.
- Barrier Properties: Biodegradable polymers like PLA have good barrier properties against moisture but may be less effective against gases compared to conventional plastics.

Conventional Plastics:

- Mechanical Properties: Excellent tensile strength, flexibility, and durability.
- Thermal Stability: High thermal resistance, suitable for a wide range of applications.
- Barrier Properties: Superior gas and moisture barrier properties, making them ideal for food packaging.

Other Sustainable Alternatives:

- Bio-based Plastics: Comparable mechanical and barrier properties to their petroleum-based counterparts but not necessarily biodegradable.
- Recycled Plastics: Properties depend on the purity and processing of the recycled material, often slightly inferior to virgin plastics.

Environmental Impact

Biodegradable Polymers:

- Degradation: Designed to degrade through natural processes, reducing long-term environmental pollution. Degradation rates vary with environmental conditions.
- Ecological Footprint: Lower carbon footprint during production if sourced from renewable materials. Compostable under industrial composting conditions.

Conventional Plastics:

- Degradation: Persistent in the environment, contributing significantly to pollution and microplastic contamination.
- Ecological Footprint: High carbon footprint due to fossil fuel extraction and processing. Non-biodegradable and challenging to recycle efficiently.

Other Sustainable Alternatives:

- Bio-based Plastics: Reduced reliance on fossil fuels but may still contribute to pollution if not biodegradable.
- Recycled Plastics: Reduces waste and conserves resources but recycling processes can be energy-intensive and not all plastics are recyclable.

ECONOMIC FEASIBILITY

Biodegradable Polymers:

- Cost: Higher production costs due to raw material prices and less mature manufacturing technologies. Economies of scale and technological advancements are needed to reduce costs.
- Market Acceptance: Growing consumer demand for sustainable products supports market growth, but higher costs can be a barrier.

Conventional Plastics:

- Cost: Lower production costs due to established infrastructure and economies of scale.
- Market Acceptance: Widely accepted due to cost-effectiveness and versatility, but facing increasing regulatory and consumer pressure for sustainability.

Other Sustainable Alternatives:

- Bio-based Plastics: Cost is intermediate between biodegradable and conventional plastics. Market acceptance varies based on sustainability credentials and performance.
- Recycled Plastics: Can be cost-effective if recycling systems are efficient. Market acceptance depends on consumer and industry willingness to adopt recycled materials.

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LIMITATIONS & DRAWBACKS

Despite the promising potential of biodegradable polymers for sustainable packaging solutions, several limitations and drawbacks hinder their widespread adoption and application. These issues range from technical and economic challenges to environmental and logistical concerns.

Technical Limitations

Mechanical Properties:

- Strength and Durability: Biodegradable polymers often exhibit lower tensile strength, elasticity, and impact resistance compared to conventional plastics. This limits their application in scenarios requiring high durability and mechanical performance.
- Temperature Sensitivity: Many biodegradable polymers, such as PLA and PHA, have lower thermal stability, making them unsuitable for high-temperature applications. This restricts their use in packaging for hot foods or sterilization processes.

Barrier Properties:

- Moisture and Gas Permeability: Biodegradable polymers generally have inferior barrier properties against gases and moisture. This can compromise the shelf life and quality of food products, limiting their use in food packaging where extended preservation is essential.

Processing Challenges:

- Manufacturing Complexity: The production processes for biodegradable polymers can be more complex and less efficient than those for conventional plastics. Issues such as slower polymerization rates and the need for precise control of fermentation conditions increase production complexity and cost.
- Compatibility with Existing Equipment: Many biodegradable polymers require modifications or entirely new equipment for processing and manufacturing, posing a significant investment challenge for existing production lines.

Economic Drawbacks

Higher Production Costs:

- Raw Material Costs: Renewable raw materials used for biodegradable polymers can be more expensive than petroleum-based materials. This is due to limited supply chains and higher costs associated with sustainable agricultural practices.

- Scale of Production: The economies of scale for biodegradable polymers are not as advanced as those for conventional plastics, leading to higher per-unit production costs. This makes biodegradable alternatives less competitive in the market.

Market Penetration:

- Consumer Willingness to Pay: While there is growing consumer interest in sustainable products, the higher cost of biodegradable packaging can deter widespread adoption. Price sensitivity in certain markets can limit the demand for biodegradable alternatives.
- Industry Adoption: The transition to biodegradable polymers requires significant changes in production processes and supply chains, leading to initial resistance from industries accustomed to conventional plastics.

Environmental and Logistical Concerns

Degradation Conditions:

- Specific Requirements: Biodegradable polymers often require specific environmental conditions (e.g., industrial composting facilities) to degrade effectively. In the absence of these conditions, they may not break down as intended, diminishing their environmental benefits.
- Incomplete Degradation: In some cases, biodegradable polymers may not fully degrade, leaving behind microplastics or other residues that can still harm the environment.

Waste Management Infrastructure:

- Lack of Facilities: The infrastructure for composting and proper disposal of biodegradable polymers is not universally available. Many regions lack the facilities needed to process biodegradable waste effectively, leading to these materials ending up in landfills where they may not degrade as designed.
- Contamination Issues: Mixing biodegradable plastics with conventional plastics in recycling streams can contaminate the recycling process, reducing the quality of recycled materials and complicating waste management.

Regulatory and Standardization Issues

Inconsistent Standards:

- Varied Regulations: Different regions have varying regulations and standards for biodegradable materials, leading to inconsistencies in what qualifies as biodegradable. This can create confusion and compliance challenges for manufacturers and consumers.
- Certification and Labeling: The lack of standardized certification and labeling systems for biodegradable polymers can make it difficult for consumers to make informed choices and for producers to market their products effectively.

SYNTHESIS AND CHARACTERIZATION

Synthesis Outcomes:

- PLA and PHA Production: PLA was successfully synthesized through ring-opening polymerization of lactide, achieving high purity and desired molecular weight. PHA was produced via microbial fermentation using selected bacterial strains, yielding high-quality polymer with consistent properties.
- Natural Polymer Modification: Starch and cellulose were modified to enhance their mechanical properties and water resistance. The modified polymers showed improved performance suitable for packaging applications.

Structural and Thermal Properties:

- FTIR and NMR Analysis: FTIR spectra confirmed the presence of characteristic functional groups in PLA and PHA. NMR analysis provided detailed insights into the polymer backbone structure, indicating successful polymerization.
- DSC and TGA Results: DSC analysis showed that PLA and PHA have lower melting temperatures compared to conventional plastics, with PLA exhibiting a melting point around 150-170°C and PHA around 175°C. TGA results indicated good thermal stability up to their respective degradation temperatures.

Mechanical and Barrier Properties:

- Tensile Testing: PLA and PHA demonstrated tensile strengths of 50-70 MPa and 30-50 MPa, respectively, lower than those of conventional plastics like PET (~200 MPa). However, blending and the addition of nanocomposites significantly improved their mechanical properties.

- Barrier Performance: The WVTR and gas permeability tests showed that PLA has good moisture barrier properties but moderate gas barrier properties. PHA exhibited better gas barrier properties but was less effective against moisture.

Application Testing

Food Packaging:

- Shelf-life Studies: Biodegradable polymers effectively extended the shelf life of packaged foods, particularly fresh produce, due to their adequate moisture barrier properties.
- Barrier Performance: While suitable for short-term food packaging, the moderate gas barrier properties of PLA limited its use for products requiring long-term preservation.

Medical Supplies:

- Sterility and Biocompatibility: PLA and PHA maintained sterility of medical instruments and demonstrated biocompatibility in cytotoxicity tests, indicating their suitability for medical packaging and disposable medical devices.
- Degradation in Biological Environments: Both polymers showed controlled degradation rates in simulated biological environments, making them ideal for temporary medical applications.

Agricultural Films:

- Field Trials: Biodegradable films performed well in agricultural settings, providing effective weed control and moisture retention. Their degradation post-use facilitated soil plowing without leaving harmful residues.
- Degradation Studies: The films degraded within 3-6 months under natural conditions, aligning with the growing season and reducing environmental impact.

Environmental Impact Assessment

Degradation Studies:

- Composting and Soil Burial: Under industrial composting conditions, PLA and PHA degraded within 90-180 days, significantly faster than conventional plastics. Soil burial tests showed effective degradation within 6-12 months, depending on environmental conditions.
- Marine Degradation: PHA exhibited better degradation rates in marine environments compared to PLA, which degraded more slowly due to lower microbial activity in oceanic conditions.

Life Cycle Assessment (LCA):

- Resource Use and Emissions: The LCA indicated that biodegradable polymers have a lower carbon footprint and reduced greenhouse gas emissions compared to conventional plastics, particularly when sourced from renewable materials. However, the overall environmental benefit depended on effective end-of-life disposal methods.
- End-of-Life Scenarios: Composting and industrial biodegradation were the most favorable disposal methods, while landfill conditions did not support effective degradation, highlighting the need for appropriate waste management infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

The development of biodegradable polymers for sustainable packaging solutions represents a promising advancement in addressing environmental challenges posed by conventional plastics. This study comprehensively examined the synthesis, characterization, application testing, environmental impact, and economic feasibility of biodegradable polymers, providing valuable insights into their potential and limitations.

Key Findings

Synthesis and Properties:

- ○ Biodegradable polymers such as PLA and PHA were successfully synthesized using renewable raw materials and advanced polymerization techniques.
- ○ These polymers exhibited adequate mechanical and barrier properties for various packaging applications, though they generally fell short compared to conventional plastics.

Application Performance:

- ○ Biodegradable polymers performed well in specific applications like food packaging, medical supplies, and agricultural films. They effectively preserved product quality and demonstrated controlled degradation in appropriate environmental conditions.

- Their use in high-temperature applications and long-term food preservation was limited due to lower thermal stability and moderate gas barrier properties.

Environmental Impact:

- Biodegradable polymers showed a significant reduction in carbon footprint and greenhouse gas emissions compared to conventional plastics, especially when sourced from renewable materials.
- They degraded effectively under industrial composting conditions, but required specific environmental settings for optimal degradation, highlighting the importance of appropriate waste management infrastructure.

Economic Feasibility:

- The current production costs of biodegradable polymers are higher than those of conventional plastics, due to the price of renewable raw materials and less mature production technologies.
- Market analysis indicated a growing consumer willingness to pay a premium for sustainable packaging, but price sensitivity remains a barrier to widespread adoption.

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