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Microbial Plastic Degradation: Nature's Solution for Sustainable Waste Management

Santanu Biswas[1], Subhajit Pal[2], Sayani Das[3], Soumili Banerjee[4], Semanti Ghosh[5], Bidisha Ghosh[6], Subhasis Sarkar[7], Suranjana Sarkar[8]*

[1]*Department of Microbiology, School of Life Sciences, Swami Vivekananda University, Barrackpore, West Bengal700121, Email: santanumicro2@gmail.com, Ph: 7001479213*
[2]*Department of Microbiology, School of Life Sciences, Swami Vivekananda University, Barrackpore, West Bengal700121, Email: subhajitpal073@gmail.com, Ph: 7319307938*
[3]*Department of Microbiology, School of Life Sciences, Swami Vivekananda University, Barrackpore, West Bengal700121, Email: dassayani405@gmail.com Ph: 9748240462*
[4]*Department of Microbiology, School of Life Sciences, Swami Vivekananda University, Barrackpore, West Bengal700121, Email: soumilibanerjee172@gmail.com, Ph: 9674393909*
[5]*Department of Biotechnology, School of Life Sciences, Swami Vivekananda University, Barrackpore, West Bengal- 700121, Email: semantig@svu.ac.in, Ph- 9432912893*
[6]*Department of Biotechnology, School of Life Sciences, Swami Vivekananda University, Barrackpore, West Bengal- 700121, Email: bidishag@svu.ac.in, Ph- 8017314552*
[7]*Department of Microbiology, School of Life Sciences, Swami Vivekananda University, Barrackpore, West Bengal- 700121, Email: subhasiss@svu.ac.in, Ph- 960919374*
[8]*Department of Microbiology, School of Life Sciences, Swami Vivekananda University, Barrackpore, West Bengal- 700121, Email: suranjanas@svu.ac.in, Ph- 8981278415*

***Corresponding author:** *Suranjana Sarkar*
**Department of Microbiology, School of Life Sciences, Swami Vivekananda University, Barrackpore, West Bengal- 700121, Email: suranjanas@svu.ac.in, Ph- 8981278415*

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Abstract

Plastic pollution has emerged as a global environmental crisis, demanding innovative and sustainable waste management strategies. This review explores the potential of harnessing nature's capabilities, specifically through microbial plastic degradation, as a promising avenue for sustainable waste management. The focus is on the collaborative action of microorganisms, utilizing their enzymatic activities to enhance plastic degradation. This review delves into the intricate mechanisms of microbial interaction with various types of plastics, emphasizing recent advancements in microbial plastic degradation research. Furthermore, it discusses the challenges associated with scaling up microbial degradation processes and envisions the incorporation of these approaches into practical waste management solutions. This exploration of microbial plastic degradation represents a critical step in mitigating the environmental impact of plastic pollution and promoting a more sustainable and eco-friendly waste management paradigm.

Keywords: Bioremediation, Enzymatic degradation, Metagenomics, Microbial plastic degradation, Plastic pollution

Introduction

Plastic pollution has emerged as a pressing environmental concern with far-reaching consequences. The widespread use of plastics in our modern world has led to a proliferation of non-biodegradable materials that persist in ecosystems for centuries, posing grave threats to our planet's health. From choking marine life in our oceans to infiltrating food chains and contaminating drinking water sources, the ubiquity of plastic pollution demands urgent attention and action. This introduction explores the multifaceted nature of the plastic pollution crisis, delving into its causes, effects, and the critical need for sustainable solutions to mitigate its environmental and human impacts.

Plastic pollution has emerged as a pressing environmental issue, casting a shadow over ecosystems and communities globally. The extensive use of plastic across industries, combined with improper disposal practices, has resulted in widespread contamination of both terrestrial and aquatic environments. The enduring nature of plastic, which contributes to its versatility, also leads to its persistence in the environment, causing harmful effects on wildlife, ecosystems, and human health. The consequences of plastic pollution, extending from oceans and rivers to landscapes, have reached an alarming scale. The intricate web of impacts encompasses harm to marine life, disruptions to ecosystems, and the potential introduction of toxic substances into the food chain. Effectively addressing plastic pollution necessitates a thorough understanding (Iroegbu *et al*., 2021).

Plastic pollution has far-reaching effects on biological systems, encompassing organisms across various scales from microscopic life forms to apex predators, profoundly impacting biodiversity and the health of ecosystems. At the microscale, plastic fragments undergo photochemical degradation, breaking down into microplastics measuring less than five millimeters. These microplastics are pervasive in aquatic environments, posing a significant threat to marine biology. Marine organisms, ranging from plankton to fish, can ingest microplastics directly or indirectly through the food chain, leading to various physiological and behavioral changes. The accumulation of plastic particles in the tissues of marine organisms can interfere with their digestive processes, nutrient absorption, and overall health. Additionally, the introduction of plastic additives and associated chemicals into ecosystems may have toxic effects on aquatic life (Thushari *et al*., 2020). The repercussions extend to higher trophic levels, affecting species such as seabirds, marine mammals, and even terrestrial organisms. Ingestion of plastics can cause physical harm, blockages, and internal injuries, while the chemicals associated with plastics may disrupt endocrine systems, impair reproductive functions, and compromise the overall fitness of affected species. Plastic pollution also has cascading effects on ecosystems, disrupting ecological balances and potentially leading to population declines and alterations in community structures. The persistence of plastics contributes to habitat degradation and alters nutrient cycles, influencing the overall health and functioning of ecosystems (Rustagi *et al*., 2011; Kibria *et al*., 2023).

Beyond ecological consequences, the impact of plastic pollution on biological systems raises concerns for human health. Through the consumption of contaminated seafood and other resources, humans may be exposed to plastic-associated chemicals, with potential implications for long-term health.

Sources of Plastic Pollution

Plastic pollution stands as a pervasive environmental challenge with a multitude of origins. The principal contributors to plastic pollution encompass various sources (Iroegbu *et al*., 2021):

Single-Use Plastics: Items like plastic bags, straws, bottles, and packaging, designed for brief use and subsequent disposal, significantly contribute to the accumulation of plastic waste.

Improper Waste Disposal: Inadequate waste management systems, including improper disposal in landfills, open dumps, and water bodies, play a substantial role in plastic pollution. In numerous instances, plastic waste is not disposed of or recycled appropriately.

Microplastics from Larger Plastic Items: Larger plastic items breaking down into smaller fragments, known as microplastics, due to exposure to sunlight, wind, and water, constitute a significant source of pollution in oceans, rivers, and soil.

Industrial Processes: Plastic pollution is fueled by industrial activities involved in the production and manufacturing of plastic goods. Plastic pellets, or nurdles, used as raw materials, contribute to pollution through accidental spills and inadequate handling.

Shipping and Fishing Activities: Maritime operations release plastic waste, including fishing gear, into oceans and water bodies, with cargo spills and shipping activities adding to the plastic pollution burden.

Stormwater Runoff: Rainwater and stormwater transport plastic debris from streets and sidewalks into storm drains, rivers, and ultimately the ocean, becoming a major source of plastic pollution in waterways.

Inadequate Recycling: The lack of proper recycling infrastructure and low recycling rates contribute to the build-up of plastic waste. When plastics are not recycled appropriately, they may find their way into landfills or the environment.

Role of Microbes

Microorganisms, specifically bacteria and fungi, play a pivotal role in the degradation of plastic through a natural process known as microbial degradation or biodegradation. This process involves the enzymatic action of microorganisms that break down complex plastic polymers into simpler compounds. The diverse roles of microbes in plastic degradation encompass several key aspects (Cai *et al*., 2023):

1. Firstly, microbial enzymes, such as lipases and esterases, catalyze the breakdown of specific bonds in plastic molecules, initiating the degradation process.
2. Secondly, microbes facilitate hydrolysis, a chemical process where water molecules are added to break down plastic polymers. Hydrolytic enzymes secreted by microorganisms contribute to the fragmentation of large plastic molecules into smaller components.
3. Moreover, certain microorganisms can utilize plastic compounds as a carbon source for their metabolic activities. This metabolic process involves assimilating plastic-derived carbon into the microbial biomass, incorporating plastic components into the microbial life cycle.
4. Microbial adaptation to plastic as a substrate is another significant aspect, where some microbial communities have evolved to thrive in environments with high concentrations of plastics. This adaptation involves the development of specific pathways and enzymes conducive to plastic degradation.
5. Synergistic interactions among microbial communities enhance plastic degradation. Different microorganisms collaborate, with one producing enzymes to initiate breakdown and another utilizing the resulting smaller components for energy.
6. Biofilm formation on the surface of plastics is facilitated by microbes, creating a conducive environment for microbial activity. Biofilms contribute to the exchange of genetic material and metabolic by-products, enhancing the overall degradation process.

Understanding and leveraging the role of microbes in plastic degradation are essential for the development of sustainable waste management practices and innovative biotechnological solutions. Ongoing research is actively exploring microbial communities, their enzymatic activities, and ways to enhance the efficiency of plastic degradation processes to address the global challenge of plastic pollution.

Mechanism of Microbial Degradation

The intricate process of biological plastic degradation relies on the enzymatic activities of microorganisms, predominantly bacteria and fungi, equipped with specific tools to break down complex plastic polymers. Initially, microorganisms employ mechanisms such as the secretion of extracellular enzymes or the establishment of biofilms on the plastic surface, facilitating recognition and attachment. These biofilms, consisting of microbial consortia, provide a structured microenvironment for enzymatic reactions to occur effectively. The enzymatic initiation of plastic degradation involves the production of key enzymes like lipases, esterases, and proteases. For instance, enzymes like PETases play a pivotal role in the hydrolysis of ester bonds within polyethylene terephthalate (PET). This enzymatic hydrolysis results in the cleavage of large molecular chains, leading to the fragmentation of the plastic polymer into smaller oligomers or monomers. Microbial metabolic utilization is a critical phase where microorganisms assimilate the degraded plastic compounds into their metabolic pathways. Some microbes possess the metabolic prowess to utilize these breakdown products as a carbon or energy source, integrating plastic-derived carbon into their biomass. This metabolic process not only supports the growth and reproduction of the microbial population but also sustains their activity in environments characterized by high concentrations of plastic. Throughout the degradation process, microorganisms may produce secondary metabolites and by-products, including organic acids and monomers. These substances can have ecological implications, potentially influencing the surrounding environment or contributing to the further breakdown of plastics. The ultimate goal of biological plastic degradation is complete biodegradation, where, under favorable conditions, microorganisms proficient in plastic degradation can convert plastics into innocuous substances such as water, carbon dioxide, and biomass. However, achieving this requires a nuanced understanding of factors such as plastic composition, the specific enzymatic capabilities of microbial communities, environmental conditions (including temperature, humidity, and pH), and the availability of essential nutrients (Mohanan *et al*., 2020).

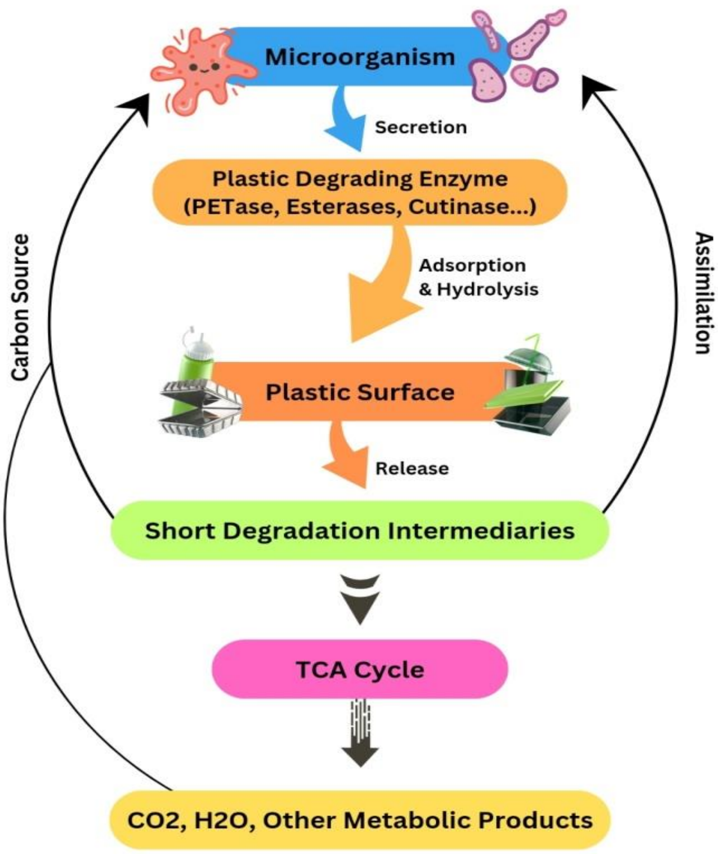

Fig 1: Biological breakdown of plastics

Enzymes Involved in Plastic Degradation

PETase (Polyethylene Terephthalate Esterase): *Ideonella sakaiensis*, a Gram-negative bacterium, is renowned for its exceptional PET-degrading abilities. The enzyme PETase, derived from this bacterium, is instrumental in the initial phases of plastic degradation. It operates by hydrolyzing ester bonds within polyethylene terephthalate (PET), facilitating the breakdown of this widely used plastic (Karunatillaka *et al*., 2022).

MHETase (Mono(2-hydroxyethyl) terephthalate hydrolase): *Ideonella sakaiensis* also produces MHETase, an enzyme complementing the action of PETase. MHETase further hydrolyzes the intermediate product mono(2-hydroxyethyl) terephthalate (MHET) into its constituent monomers, contributing to the efficient degradation of PET (Palm *et al*., 2019).

Lipases and Esterases: Lipases and esterases, essential enzymes in ester bond hydrolysis, are synthesized by various microorganisms. Bacterial lipases, exemplified by *Pseudomonas spp*., and fungal esterases from species like *Aspergillus* spp., play pivotal roles in initiating the breakdown of ester bonds within plastic polymers (Tournier *et al*., 2023; Temporiti *et al*., 2022).

Cutinases: Microorganisms such as *Thermobifida fusca* and fungi like *Fusarium solani* produce cutinases, enzymes crucial in catalyzing the hydrolysis of ester bonds in plastics, including PET. These enzymes contribute to the degradation process by breaking down the polymer structure (Sahu *et al*., 2023).

Proteases: Proteases, enzymes involved in breaking peptide bonds in proteins, are produced by diverse microorganisms, including bacteria like *Bacillus* spp. and fungi such as *Aspergillus* spp., While not specific to plastics, proteases contribute to the degradation of plastics containing proteinaceous contaminants (Cai *et al*., 2023).

Polyurethanase: *Pseudomonas citronellolis* is a notable bacterium known for producing polyurethanase. This enzyme plays a significant role in breaking down polyurethane plastics by cleaving urethane bonds, contributing to the microbial degradation of this type of plastic (Russell *et al.*, 2011).

Cellulases: Fungi such as *Trichoderma reesei* and *Aspergillus niger* produce cellulases, enzymes primarily involved in cellulose degradation. While their primary function is breaking down cellulose, these enzymes may also contribute to the degradation of certain biodegradable plastics derived from plant-based materials (Cai et al., 2023).

Challenges

The enzymatic degradation of plastics presents a promising strategy for addressing plastic pollution, yet several challenges hinder its broad implementation. One notable obstacle is the specificity and diversity of enzymes, as they often exhibit selectivity towards particular types of plastics, necessitating the development of a comprehensive enzymatic toolkit to encompass the various plastic polymers. Additionally, the rate of plastic degradation by enzymes is relatively slow compared to the rapid accumulation of plastic waste, underscoring the need to enhance catalytic efficiency and kinetics for practical application. Environmental conditions, such as temperature, pH, and the presence of other chemicals, influence enzyme activity, demanding careful optimization to align with real-world scenarios. The potential toxicity and ecological impact of degradation by-products further complicate the process, requiring a thorough understanding of the environmental consequences. Scaling up enzymatic plastic degradation from laboratory experiments to large-scale applications poses logistical challenges, including production scalability, stability, and integration into existing waste management systems. Cost considerations, accessibility, and regulatory approvals are additional hurdles, as enzymes, particularly those derived from specialized microorganisms, can be expensive to produce at scale. Furthermore, the generation of microplastics and nanoplastics during enzymatic degradation raises concerns about unintended environmental consequences. Despite these challenges, ongoing research and advancements in enzymatic plastic degradation offer promise for developing more sustainable and effective solutions for managing plastic waste in the future, necessitating collaborative efforts from various stakeholders.

Future Prospect

The future prospects of enzymatic plastic degradation are highly promising as researchers and innovators actively address challenges and propel the technology forward. Key areas of development include enzyme engineering, aiming to enhance the catalytic efficiency, substrate specificity, and stability of plastic-degrading enzymes. Ongoing efforts in bioprospecting seek to discover novel enzymes from diverse microbial environments capable of efficiently breaking down various types of plastics. Exploring the synergistic effects of microbial consortia, where multiple microorganisms collaborate, holds potential for more efficient and comprehensive plastic degradation. Future endeavors will concentrate on optimizing enzymatic processes for large-scale applications, focusing on production scalability, cost-effectiveness, and integration into existing waste management infrastructure. Research into biodegradable additives that enhance enzymatic plastic degradation is underway, potentially accelerating the overall breakdown of plastics. Advancements in monitoring technologies will be crucial for assessing the environmental impact of enzymatic degradation, including the fate of by-products like microplastics and nanoplastics in ecosystems. Collaborative interdisciplinary research and the establishment of regulatory frameworks will play pivotal roles in driving the adoption and responsible deployment of enzymatic plastic degradation in industries and waste management practices. Despite challenges, the continuous dedication to research and innovation positions enzymatic approaches as a promising solution for effective plastic waste management in the future.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the prospect of enzymatic plastic degradation represents a dynamic and promising solution to the urgent global challenge of plastic pollution. Despite facing certain hurdles, the ongoing commitment to research and innovation in this domain instills confidence in its future efficacy. The refinement of enzymes through engineering and bioprospecting, alongside the exploration of microbial consortia, paints a hopeful picture of enhanced plastic degradation efficiency. As processes are optimized for large-scale applications and biodegradable additives are introduced, the practicality and economic feasibility of enzymatic degradation are anticipated to advance. Simultaneously, progress in monitoring technologies and interdisciplinary collaborations will contribute to a nuanced understanding of the environmental impact, ensuring responsible deployment of enzymatic plastic degradation. Regulatory frameworks and industry-wide adoption will be instrumental in integrating enzymatic solutions into mainstream waste management practices. The collaborative efforts of scientists, engineers, policymakers, and industries signify a transformative potential for a more sustainable and cleaner future. Despite existing challenges, the trajectory of enzymatic plastic degradation fuels optimism that it will play a pivotal role in addressing the global plastic pollution crisis in the years to come.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Declaration

The authors affirm the accuracy and truthfulness of the information presented in this document to the best of their knowledge.

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