

POLY(3-HYDROXYBUTYRATE) BY RECOMBINANT *PHAEODACTYLUM*  
*TRICORNUTUM* VIA LIGHT-EMITTING DIODE CULTIVATION AND  
MICROWAVE-ASSISTED EXTRACTION

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## **DEDICATION**

To my beloved mother and father

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## ABSTRACT

Bioplastic such as poly(3-hydroxybutyrate) (PHB) is an alternative approach to replace petroleum-derived plastic. However, high substrate cost and slow extraction process have hindered wide application of PHB. In this research, genetically modified *Phaeodactylum tricornutum* was used as an alternative PHB producer because it is able to utilize carbon dioxide. Ammonium and nitrate were used as nitrogen sources in the cultivation to suppress and activate PHB synthesis of this strain, respectively. The first phase of this study aimed to simplify the cultivation process by substituting the ammonium at its complete depletion point on day 5 with nitrate and enhance PHB productivity by different light wavelengths strategy. In the simplified cultivation method or known as one-step cultivation (OSC) for PHB synthesis, the steps in cell harvesting were removed when switching the nitrogen sources. Findings revealed that OSC is feasible as no sign of PHB synthesis suppression was present. In fact, the PHB productivity has improved to  $9.75 \pm 0.64$  ( $117.02 \pm 7.73$  mg/L) from  $7.40 \pm 0.52$  mg/L/day ( $85.26 \pm 1.83$  mg/L) which was achieved via multiple-step cultivation. In different light wavelength studies, red light was determined as better wavelength where the culture revealed higher specific growth rate and approximately 1.45-fold higher PHB productivity against white light culture. In the second phase of the study, PHB was extracted from wet biomass using microwave-assisted extraction (MAE) and propylene carbonate/isopropanol (PC/IPA). PC/IPA has high PHB solubility of  $94.8 \pm 1.5\%$ , boiling point of  $99.1$  °C, good dielectric properties, and miscible with water. Two-level full factorial design was used to evaluate the effect of the parameters that were A: extraction temperature ( $65$ - $85$  °C), B: extraction duration ( $5$ - $15$  min), and C: solvent-to-biomass ratio ( $5$ - $15$  mL/g) in PHB MAE. The results revealed that factor A and C significantly influenced the PHB recovery. The PHB MAE was optimized using central composite design. Based on prediction, the optimum PHB recovery of  $97.89\%$  can be achieved at  $88$  °C for  $15$  min with solvent-to-biomass ratio of  $6.4$  mL/g. The experimental PHB recovery of  $95.63 \pm 0.70\%$  with purity of  $75 \pm 4\%$  achieved by MAE method were significantly higher than conventional heating extraction (CHE) using chloroform (recovery:  $79.53 \pm 2.87\%$ , purity:  $97 \pm 2\%$ ). The recovered PHB by MAE has high molecular weight of  $1.4 \times 10^6$  Da. However, the melting point, melting enthalpy, and crystallinity were lower than PHB recovered from CHE using chloroform. The outcomes revealed the MAE system was excellent for PHB extraction as it offers high PHB recovery, cell breaking feature, safe processing conditions, wet biomass extraction and less hazardous compared to chloroform.

## ABSTRAK

Bioplastik seperti poli(3-hidroksibutirat) (PHB) adalah pendekatan alternatif bagi menggantikan plastik berasaskan petroleum. Walau bagaimanapun, kos substrat yang tinggi dan proses pengekstrakan yang perlahan menghalang aplikasi PHB secara meluas. Dalam kajian ini, *Phaeodactylum tricornutum* terubah suai genetik telah digunakan sebagai penghasil PHB alternatif memandangkan ia boleh menggunakan karbon dioksida. Ammonium dan nitrat masing-masing telah digunakan sebagai sumber nitrogen dalam penanaman untuk menghalang dan mengaktifkan sintesis PHB oleh mikroorganisma ini. Fasa pertama kajian bertujuan untuk mempermudah proses penanaman dengan menggantikan ammonium pada titik penghabisannya pada hari ke-5 dengan nitrat dan meningkatkan produktiviti PHB melalui strategi gelombang cahaya yang berlainan. Dalam kaedah penanaman mudah atau dikenali sebagai penanaman satu langkah (OSC) bagi penghasilan PHB, langkah penuaian sel telah dikeluarkan semasa penukaran sumber nitrogen. Hasil kajian menunjukkan OSC boleh dilaksanakan kerana tiada tanda halangan yang wujud pada sintesis PHB. Malah, produktiviti PHB telah meningkat kepada  $9.75 \pm 0.64$  ( $117.02 \pm 7.73$  mg/L) daripada  $7.40 \pm 0.52$  mg/L/hari ( $85.26 \pm 1.83$  mg/L) yang telah dicapai melalui penanaman langkah berganda. Dalam kajian gelombang cahaya yang berbeza, cahaya merah merupakan gelombang cahaya lebih baik yang mana kultur menunjukkan kadar pertumbuhan spesifik yang lebih tinggi dan produktiviti PHB lebih tinggi sebanyak 1.45 kali ganda lebih tinggi berbanding kultur di bawah cahaya putih. Dalam fasa kedua kajian, PHB telah diekstrak daripada biojisim basah menggunakan pengekstrakan berbantuan gelombang mikro (MAE) dan propilena karbonat/isopropanol (PC/IPA). PC/IPA mempunyai kelarutan PHB yang tinggi iaitu  $94.8 \pm 1.5\%$ , takat didih  $99.1$  °C, sifat dielektrik yang baik dan larut dalam air. Reka bentuk dua peringkat faktorial penuh telah diguna untuk menilai kesan parameter A: suhu pengekstrakan ( $65$ - $85$  °C), B: tempoh pengekstrakan ( $5$ - $15$  minit) dan C: nisbah pelarut kepada biojisim ( $5$ - $15$  mL/g) di MAE. Keputusan menunjukkan bahawa faktor A dan C mempengaruhi perolehan PHB secara signifikan. MAE bagi PHB telah dioptimumkan menggunakan reka bentuk komposit sentral. Berdasarkan ramalan, perolehan PHB optimum sebanyak  $97.89\%$  boleh dicapai pada  $88$  °C,  $15$  minit dengan nisbah pelarut kepada biojisim  $6.4$  mL/g. Perolehan PHB secara ujikaji adalah  $95.63 \pm 0.70\%$  dengan ketulenan  $75 \pm 4\%$  dicapai oleh kaedah MAE dan nilai ini jauh lebih tinggi daripada pengekstrakan pemanasan konvensional (CHE) menggunakan kloroform (perolehan:  $79.53 \pm 2.87\%$ , ketulenan:  $97 \pm 2\%$ ). PHB yang diperoleh melalui MAE mempunyai berat molekul yang tinggi iaitu  $1.4 \times 10^6$  Da. Namun, takat lebur, entalpi lebur dan kekristalan lebih rendah daripada PHB yang diperoleh daripada CHE menggunakan kloroform. Hasil kajian menunjukkan sistem MAE ini amat baik untuk pengekstrakan PHB kerana ia menawarkan perolehan PHB yang tinggi, ciri pemecahan sel, pemprosesan yang selamat, pengekstrakan menggunakan biojisim basah, dan kurang berbahaya berbanding dengan penggunaan kloroform.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A	-	Extraction temperature
Ace	-	Acetone
Adeq.	-	Adequate
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	-	Adjusted R-squared
ANOVA	-	Analysis of variance
ATP	-	Adenosine triphosphate
B	-	Extraction duration
C	-	Solvent-to-biomass ratio
CCD	-	Central Composite Design
CHE	-	Conventional heating extraction
Conc.	-	Concentration
C.V.	-	Coefficient of variation
dcw	-	Dry cell weight
DF	-	Degree of freedom
DOE	-	Design of experiment
<i>E. coli</i>	-	<i>Escherichia coli</i>
e.g.	-	For Example
EPA	-	Eicosapentaenoic acid
EtOH	-	Ethanol
FabG	-	3-ketoacyl-CoA reductase
FDA	-	Food and Drug Administration
FID	-	Flame ionization detector
GC	-	Gas chromatography
GM	-	Genetically modified
GP	-	Growth phase
GPC	-	Gel permeation chromatography
GSK	-	GlaxoSmithKline
HPLC	-	High performance liquid chromatography
IPA	-	Isopropanol
LED	-	Light-emitting diodes

MAE	-	Microwave-assisted extraction
Max.	-	Maximum
MSC	-	Medium shift cultivation
M <sub>w</sub>	-	Molecular weight
N/A	-	Not applicable
NADPH	-	Nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide phosphate
No.	-	Number
NPCM	-	Non-PHA cellular mass
OD	-	Optical density
OSC	-	One-step cultivation
PBS	-	Phosphate buffered saline
PC	-	Propylene carbonate
PEA	-	Propylene carbonate:Ethanol:Acetone
PHA	-	Polyhydroxyalkanoate
PhaA	-	β-ketothiolase
PhaB	-	Acetoacetyl-CoA reductase
PhaC	-	PHA synthase
PhaG	-	3-hydroxyl-ACP-CoA transferase
PhaJ	-	(R)-enoyl-CoA hydratase
Prob	-	Probability
Prod.		Productivity
PS	-	Photosystem
<i>P. tricornutum</i>	-	<i>Phaeodactylum tricornutum</i>
Pred R <sup>2</sup>	-	Predicted R-squared
R	-	PHB recovery
R <sup>2</sup>	-	R-squared
RL	-	Red light
RSM	-	Response surface methodology
SEM	-	Scanning electron microscopy
SP	-	PHB-synthesis phase
Std	-	Standard
Std. Dev.	-	Standard deviation
Temp.	-	Temperature



US	-	United states
UV	-	Ultraviolet
v/v	-	Volume per volume
WBL	-	White to blue light
WL	-	White light
WRL	-	White to red light
WM	-	Wet mass
w/v	-	Weight per volume
3D	-	Three dimension

## LIST OF SYMBOLS

$\alpha$	-	Axial point
$A_i, B_i, C_i$	-	Antoine constants of component $i$
$\beta$	-	Beta
$\beta_0, \beta_i, \beta_{ii}, \beta_{ij}$	-	Regression coefficients for intercept, linear, quadratic and interaction terms of quadratic regression model
$C_0$	-	Total number of disrupted cells
$C_t$	-	Total cell disruption after treatment
$C$	-	Cell density (cells/mL)
Da	-	Dalton
$\epsilon'$	-	Dielectric constant
$\epsilon''$	-	Dielectric loss
$\epsilon$	-	Statistical error
$\Delta H_m$	-	Melting enthalpy ( $\text{Jg}^{-1}$ )
Hz	-	Hertz
$k$	-	Rate of cell division ( $\text{day}^{-1}$ )
$k$	-	Number of factor
$k'$	-	Number of the coded independent variables
mm	-	Millimeter
M	-	Molar
$M_{\text{biomass}}$	-	Mass of biomass (mg)
$M_{\text{PHB}}$	-	Total mass of PHB recovered from a biomass (mg)
$m_{\text{gcPHB}}$	-	Mass of PHB quantified by GC (mg)
$m_{\text{PHB}}$	-	Mass of extracted PHB (mg)
mm HG	-	Millimeter of mercury
n	-	Degree of polymerization
nm	-	Nanometre
$N$	-	Concentration of ammonium ( $\mu\text{M}$ )
$N_0$	-	Total number of intact cell for non-treated sample
$N_t$	-	Intact cells number after treatment
$\rho_i$	-	Vapour pressure of component $i$ (mm HG)

$\rho_{total}$	-	Total vapour pressure (mm HG)
pH	-	Potential of hydrogen
R	-	Alkyl group
$R^2$	-	Regression coefficient
rpm	-	Rotation per minute
t	-	Time interval (day)
$T$	-	Temperature ( $^{\circ}\text{C}$ )
$T_m$	-	Melting temperature ( $^{\circ}\text{C}$ )
$\tan \delta$	-	Loss tangent
$\mu\text{mol m}^{-2}\text{s}^{-1}$	-	Micromoles per square meter per second
$\mu$	-	Specific growth rate ( $\text{day}^{-1}$ )
$U_{\text{NH}_4^+}$	-	Uptake rate of ammonium ( $\mu\text{M N/cell/day}$ )
wt%	-	Weight percentage
x	-	Number of repeating units
$\Delta x$	-	Step size for the significant factor
$\chi_c$	-	Crystallinity (%)
$X_i$	-	Mole fraction of component $i$ in the solution
$\hat{Y}$	-	Response
$Y_i$	-	Mole fraction of component $i$ in gas phase
$Y_{yield}$	-	Percentage of PHB recovery yield (%)

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Research Background

Plastics are organic polymer commonly synthesized using petrochemicals such as polyethylene, polyvinyl chloride, and polystyrene. These petrochemicals are obtained by catalysis of their monomers through polymerization and polycondensation process. Due to its outstanding properties which can be moulded into desired shape and performance better than metal and wood, plastics have wide variety of industrial applications (Álvarez-Chávez *et al.*, 2012). Hence, the demand for plastics is increasing while the petroleum reserves are declining. According to Qualman in 2017, over 400 million tons of plastics were produced by 2017. However, the wide applications of plastics have raised abundance of environmental issues. The high molecular weight of plastics which ranged from 50 to 1,000 kDa has made the plastics non-biodegradable and persist in the environment for a long time (Kumaravel *et al.*, 2010). This eventually led to severe pollutions, landfill problem, and climate change (Barker *et al.*, 2007; Law *et al.*, 2010; Philp *et al.*, 2013). In order to reduce the use of petrochemical-derived plastics, attempts were made to develop potential sustainable green alternatives.

Bioplastics are advance materials derived from renewable sources and can be biodegraded. These materials were developed to replace problematic petroleum-based plastics. The bioplastics can be classified into starch-based plastics, chemically synthesized bioplastics, and polylactic acid plastics (Jabeen *et al.*, 2015). There is another group of bioplastics known as organism-based bioplastics which are synthesized by microorganisms using starch or glucose (Tan *et al.*, 2014). Polyhydroxyalkanoates (PHAs) are a type of saturated poly- $\alpha$ -hydroxy esters synthesized by bacteria. Under stress condition, bacteria produce enzymes that convert acetyl-CoA to PHAs. These polyesters have physical properties which are

similar to polypropylene but are 100% biodegradable and biocompatible (Singh, 2015). Due to these properties, PHAs received attention from the industry and can be potentially used in medical applications.

One of the applications of PHAs is in food packaging material. Besides being biodegradable, these polyesters have low water vapour permeability which is an advantage over other biopolymers. The most common type of PHAs is poly(3-hydroxybutyrate) (PHB), which is the mostly used PHA in food packaging. This polyester is applied in bulk shrink packaging and flexible intermedia bulk containers (Jabeen *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, PHB has also been utilized in bone scaffold development in tissue engineering. In medical industry, PHB has been utilized in sustained drug delivery systems and medical devices. In tissue engineering, scaffolding materials should satisfy several criteria such as biocompatible which are non-immunogenic, non-cytotoxic, and non-inflammatory. Besides, the materials should possess great mechanical properties, particularly for bone scaffold to support bone tissue regeneration and prevent structural failure during patient's normal activities. Hence, PHB is a potential candidate for achieving ideal bone scaffold (Shrivastav *et al.*, 2013).

To increase the availability and reduce the production cost of PHB, several organisms had been genetically modified to synthesize the polymer. Besides bacterial expression system, plant-based expression systems are also used to produce PHAs. Plant-based expression systems utilize photosynthesis process and do not require external organic source in PHAs synthesis. This low-cost expression system is very attractive when applied in large scale production as it reduces the production cost. Despite its advantages, this expression system is not ideal for application as it competes the land use with subsistence crops, disperses uncontrollably, and has extremely slow growth rate (Daniell *et al.*, 2009). Another expression system which uses microalgae (*Phaeodactylum tricorutum*) was introduced to solve the problems faced while sharing the advantages of plant-based expression systems. Hence, the microalgae expression system is relatively desirable to act as a low cost platform for PHB production (Hempel *et al.*, 2011a). To the best of our knowledge, the enhancement of cultivation for this genetically modified microalgae strain has yet to

be proposed. Since microalgae are strongly influenced by light quality, the growth and PHB synthesis of genetically modified *P. tricornutum* were enhanced by subjecting the cells to different light wavelengths.

Since PHB is accumulated as intracellular granules, it has to be extracted and it typically involves cell rupture and dissolution of PHB granules. Generally, the extraction methods can be classified into solvent extraction methods, chemical-based, and enzyme-based digestions methods. Solvent extraction is the most well-established and commonly used among all the methods due to the high purity of PHB obtained (Tan *et al.*, 2014). The solvent helps to improve the permeability of the cell wall and dissolves the polymer. In order to increase the recovery of PHB, additional mechanical treatments such as bead milling and high pressure homogenization were also supplemented to the extraction process (Kunasundari and Sudesh, 2011). Beside these treatments, several types of mechanical method such as microwave and ultrasonic had also been applied to extract intracellular components.

Microwave-assisted extraction (MAE) is an alternative of conventional heating method utilizing microwave radiation as the heating source for extraction. The application of this radiation helps to accelerate the extraction process where the heat and mass transfer occur from inside to outside of substrate. Besides short processing time, this method offers high recovery, lesser solvent consumption, and product degradation (Veggi *et al.*, 2013). All the pros make the extraction method widely applied to extract natural products, for instance flavonoids from *radix astragali* (Xiao *et al.*, 2008), solanesol from tobacco leaves (Zhou and Liu, 2006), and zerumbone from *Zingiber zerumbet* (Ghasemzadeh *et al.*, 2017). However, there is no report on the application of MAE in PHB recovery. Hence, the very first extraction of PHB using microwave radiation was demonstrated in this study.

## **1.2 Problem Statements**

Poly(3-hydroxybutyrate) (PHB) possesses commercial potential for the mass production of thermoplastic (Sudesh *et al.*, 2000). Despite the advantages of PHB, the

application of this bioplastic is still in its infant stage in the industry. This was due to the high cost of PHB which has hampered their commercial applications. In 2014, the cost of PHA was in the range of \$ 4.6 to 9.3/kg (Bolck, 2014). The high cost of PHB was caused by the high purity substrate price which accounts for 45% of the total cost and high downstream processing cost (Kourmentza *et al.*, 2017).

According to Yousuf in 2017, the cost for PHB extraction was predicted to occupy half of the production cost. Besides the high fermentation cost, PHB extraction is also time consuming and tedious (Chen and Wu, 2005; Kunasundari and Sudesh, 2011). Majority of the reported solvent extraction methods of PHB take few hours or even one day (Dalcanton, 2006; Fei *et al.*, 2016; Manangan and Shawaphun, 2010; Ramsay *et al.*, 1994). Moreover, large amount of solvent is required in the extraction process. The additional step for cells rupture increased the complexity of extraction process and energy consumption which make the step not economically feasible (Kunasundari and Sudesh, 2011). Hence, the extraction process might be a challenge to a cost effective industrial upscale production for large amounts of PHB.

Solvent extraction is capable to achieve high recovery and purity of PHB, but negative environmental impact caused by the generation of hazardous waste is the greatest current concern. Most of the developed solvent extraction methods involve the use of chlorinated organic solvents such as methylene chloride (Ramsay *et al.*, 1994), 1,2-dichloroethane (Holmes and Lim, 1990), and chloroform which possess high efficiency in extraction of PHB. But, these chlorinated organic solvents are toxic, hazardous towards the environment and human, expensive, and may cause PHB degradation (Hahn *et al.*, 1994). Although several green solvents such as 1,2-propylene carbonate (Fiorese *et al.*, 2009), and butyl acetate (Aramvash *et al.*, 2015) had been reported in previous PHB extraction studies, most of them were used without much evaluation in the aspect of waste issues, degree of environmental and health impact, and processing safeness. In addition, the extraction process conditions using green solvents are still lengthy and involved high extraction temperature which are not desirable. Moreover, the recovery yield has not been optimized yet.



Thus, in this extraction study, solvent extraction was performed under microwave radiation to extract PHB from biomass and this method is known as microwave-assisted extraction (MAE). The significant parameters and effects of microwave radiation on the extraction of PHB were determined and the process was further optimized.

### 1.3 Objectives

The main objective of this study is to enhance the overall production of PHB by improving both the cultivation technique and extraction method. In order to achieve the ultimate goal, the following integrated objectives need to be fulfilled:

- (i) To improve the PHB productivity of genetically engineered *Phaeodactylum tricornutum* in a single step (without transferring it from the medium with  $\text{NH}_4^+$  which inhibits PHB synthesis to another medium with  $\text{NO}_3^-$  for gene expression) under blue and red LED light wavelengths.
- (ii) To select solvent system based on dielectric properties, boiling point and PHB solubility.
- (iii) To extract PHB using microwave-assisted extraction method under the selected green solvent and optimize MAE parameters.

### 1.4 Research Scopes

The scope of research are as follows:

1. (i) The one-step cultivation for PHB production by genetically modified (GM) *Phaeodactylum tricornutum* through direct shifting nitrogen source from ammonium chloride to sodium nitrate was performed. The complete depletion day of ammonium in culture medium was determined. The growth and PHB accumulation by *P. tricornutum* cultivated under one-step and medium shift cultivations were compared.

- (ii) Different light wavelengths were used to enhance the PHB productivity of *P. tricornutum*. The blue, red, and white wavelengths were used as the treatment in the study. The growth and PHB accumulation by *P. tricornutum* cultivated under different light wavelengths were determined.
2. Development of green solvent system for recovery of PHB through microwave-assisted extraction. Several solvent systems such as acetone (Ace), ethanol (EtOH), isopropanol (IPA), propylene carbonate (PC), PC:Ace, PC:EtOH, PC:IPA, and PC:EtOH:Ace were evaluated in the aspects of dielectric properties, boiling point and PHB solubility.
3. (i) The factors varied in the microwave-assisted extraction are extraction temperature (65-85 °C), extraction duration (5-15 minutes), and solvent-to-biomass ratio (5.00-15.00 mL/g) on PHB extraction and experiments were performed using full factorial design. The significance of the factors and their interactions were determined.
- (ii) The extraction parameters were optimized using research surface methodology to recover maximum amount of PHB. The central composite design was utilized to develop the response surface. A polynomial model for the prediction of PHB recovery in MAE was developed. The model was verified by various diagnostic plots and the error percentages between the predicted and experimental PHB recovery.
- (iii) Recovered PHB was characterized by determining its molecular weight, melting point, and melting enthalpy.
- (iv) The effects of different solvent systems and extraction methods on PHB recovery percentage, purity percentage and properties of extracted PHB were compared.
- (v) The effects of microwave radiation on cells disruption were determined. The cells disruption percentages by conventional and microwave heating using PC:IPA were determined and compared. The cell morphological changes under different treatments were investigated by scanning electron microscope.

## 1.5 Significance of Study

The outcomes of this study are redounded for cost effective PHB production by solving the problems in the microalgae cultivation and PHB extraction. A simplified cultivation method for PHB production by GM *P. tricornutum* was developed. Light wavelength was used as the factor affecting the PHB productivity of *P. tricornutum*. Besides that, microwave-assisted extraction (MAE) was reported for the first time in PHB extraction. In the extraction study, a new green solvent system with high PHB solubility, high boiling point, good dielectric properties, and soluble in water was developed for PHB MAE. The MAE capable to recover most of the PHB from biomass in 15 minutes and below solvent's boiling point. The microwave radiation was proved to improve the dissolution of PHB and no sign of PHB degradation was detected where the recovered PHB possesses high molecular weight.

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