

Microalgae: An Alternative Source of Renewable Energy

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Abstract:- This paper presents an overview on the potentiality of microalgae with particular emphasis as a sustainable renewable energy source for biodiesel. One of the most important dilemmas of the modern world is to supply maximal amount of energy with minimal environmental impact. The total energy demand of our planet is increasing with population growth whereas the fossil fuel reserves are dwindling swiftly. Biodiesel produced from biomass is widely considered to be one of the most sustainable alternatives to fossil fuels and a viable means for energy security and environmental and economic sustainability. But as a large area of arable land is required to cultivate biodiesel producing terrestrial plants, it may lead towards food scarcity and deforestation. Microalgae have a number of characteristics that allow the production concepts of biodiesel which are significantly more sustainable than their alternatives. Microalgae possess high biomass productivity, oils with high lipid content, fast growth rates, possibility of utilizing marginal and infertile land, capable of growing in salt water and waste streams, and capable of utilizing solar light and CO₂ gas as nutrients.

Keywords: – *Biodiesel, Energy security, Environment friendly, Microalgae, Sustainability*

I. INTRODUCTION

The global energy demand is expanding with rapid population growth. Almost 1.4 billion people of our planet face daily shortage of energy [1]. Estimate shows that the world would require 50% more energy in 2030 than it does today [2]. Adversely, the fossil fuel reserves are being exhausted day by day [3]. Fossil fuel meets about 80% of the world's energy demand [4]. The basic sources of this energy are wood, coal, petroleum oil and natural gas [5-10]. As these sources of energy are limited and cannot be reused, our planet is going to face energy scarcity. In addition, the emission produced by the combustion of fossil fuels also contributes to air pollution and global warming [11-14]. The combustion of fossil fuels is a major source of air contaminants including CO_x and SO_x [15-19]. Carbon dioxide contributes to greenhouse effect [20-23]. Sulfur dioxide leads to acid rain by forming sulfuric acid which changes the normal pH of soil [5, 22]. It can be assumed that the global consumption of energy will raise and lead to more environmental smash up [16]. The concern about rapid depletion of fossil fuels, energy security and climate change are forcing governments, scientist and researchers to explore alternative sources of energy. Presently many options are being studied and implemented including solar energy, hydroelectricity, geothermal energy, wind energy, ocean energy and biofuels [24, 25]. Only the transportation sector accounts for almost 30% of the world's energy consumption most of which is in the form of liquid fuels [26]. When energy consumption for transportation comes into consideration and as two thirds of global energy consumption is derived from petroleum based liquid fuels, more attention should be given on the renewable energy sources of liquid fuels, which is biomass derived liquid fuels or biofuels [27,28]. Biofuels can play a vital role in mitigating energy crisis and environmental pollution [29, 30]. The most common biofuels are ethanol produced from sugar and starch crops, and biodiesel produced from vegetable oils and animal fats [31, 32].

The objective of this study is to reveal microalgae as an alternative renewable energy source for producing biodiesel. Microalgae has been discussed in a broad broad-spectrum showing that microalgae is a

sustainable renewable energy source for biodiesel as other biomass sources of biodiesel need arable agricultural lands and sophisticated expensive technologies for their production on commercial basis.

II. BIODIESEL

Biodiesel is a non-toxic renewable energy source. It consists of monoalkyl esters of long chain fatty acids [33]. It is derived from vegetable oils and animal fats via transesterification reaction. The animal or vegetable oils are converted into biodiesel when one mole of triglyceride reacts with three moles of alcohol (such as methanol or ethanol) to produce a mole of glycerol and three moles of monoalkyl esters (biodiesel) [5]. Methanol is the most commonly used alcohol in the commercial production of biodiesel because of its low price [4, 34]. Biodiesel is usually blended with petroleum based diesel though it also can be used in pure form with some modifications of engines [35, 36]. Blends are indicated by the abbreviation B_{XX}, where XX is the percentage of biodiesel in the mixture.

2.1 Sources of Biodiesel

Biodiesel can be produced from both edible and non-edible sources of oil such as soybean oil [37-39], rapeseed [40,41], palm oil, maize[42], mahua[43], canola, coconut, corn oil [44], cotton seed [45], sunflower [44], fish oil, peanut, mustard oil, tobacco seed oil, jojoba oil, olive oil [46], pongam seed oil, linseed, groundnut oil, tall oil, fried oil, beef tallow, chicken fat, lard oil, animal fat, soapnut, Jatropha [47], pongamia, argemone, castor [46], karanja oil [48], algae, etc.

2.2 Creditability of biodiesel

Biodiesel has the potentiality to strengthen our energy security. It is an environmentally friendly energy source [49]. It is non-toxic and highly biodegradable [50-55]. The combustion of biodiesel emits less CO_x, SO_x, hydrocarbons, aromatic hydrocarbons, alkenes, aldehydes, ketones and particulate matter [56]. Biodiesel feedstock plants absorb CO₂ through photosynthesis, which is more than it discharges by the combustion process. Therefore, it can maintain ecological balance more effectively compared to petroleum diesel. Table 1 shows average emission impacts of biodiesel blends compared to petroleum diesel [57, 58].

Table 1. Average emission impacts of biodiesel blends compared to petroleum diesel

Biodiesel Blends	B20	B40	B60	B80	B100
Unburned hydrocarbons	-20%	-35%	-49%	-59%	-67%
Carbon Monoxide	-12%	-22%	-32%	-40%	-48%
Particulate Matter	-12%	-22%	-32%	-40%	-47%
NO _x	+2%	+4%	+6%	+8%	+10%

The production of biodiesel has the potentiality to generate new employment opportunity for developing country. Moreover, biodiesel has some technical advantages. Biodiesel gives more clean combustion than petroleum diesel. It possesses high cetane number. The cetane number is a measurement of the combustion quality of diesel fuel during compression ignition. So the flammability of biodiesel is better than that of diesel oil. Biodiesel can be transported safely due to its high flash point. Biodiesel acts as a better lubricant and detergent than petroleum diesel. Table 2 shows comparison of different properties of diesel and biodiesel [59, 60].

Table 2. Comparison of different properties of diesel and biodiesel

Fuel	Density at 15° C g/cm ³	Viscosity at 40°C mm ² /s	Sulfur, %	Carbon, %	Hydrogen, %	Oxygen, %	Flash point	Cetane Number	Lower calorific value MJ/kg
Diesel	0.834	2.83	0.034	86.2	13.8	—	62	47	42.59
Biodiesel	0.8834	4.47	< 0.005	76.1	11.8	12.1	178	56	37.243

The production and use of biodiesel involve multiple input and output to make a full assessment [61]. Nothing is wasted in the process of biodiesel production. Usually sodium hydroxide or potassium hydroxide is used as catalyst for biodiesel production. 4% alcohol can be extracted from the product and reused. 9% glycerin

is produced which can be used as raw material for toiletries industry. Table 3 shows reactants and products of transesterification reaction of biodiesel production [61].

Table 3. Reactants and products of transesterification reaction of biodiesel production [61]

Input(Reactants)		Output(Products)	
1.	Oil 87%	1.	Methyl ester (Biodiesel) 86%
2.	Alcohol 12%	2.	Glycerin 9%
3.	Catalyst 1%	3.	Alcohol 4%
		4.	Fertilizer 1%

2.3 Limitations of biodiesel

As arable lands are used for biodiesel production, it may lead to food scarcity. It also may cause deforestation because of the excessive demand of land for biodiesel production. The water demand for some biodiesel crops could put unsustainable pressure on local water resources. Using fertilizer for biodiesel production can have harmful effects on environment. The combustion of biodiesel increases nitrogen oxides emissions which creates smog and acid rain [62-68]. Biodiesel is less energy efficient than petroleum diesel. The content of a gallon of biodiesel is 11% less than the energy content of petro diesel. Biodiesel has higher viscosity than petro diesel [69, 70]. The viscosity of biodiesel is about 11-17 times greater than that of diesel fuel which leads to problem in pumping, atomization in the injector and combustion [71]. Biodiesel causes excessive engine wear. Biodiesel is corrosive against copper and brass [71].

2.4 Three generations of biodiesel feedstock

- First generation (Biodiesel produced from soybeans, coconut, sunflower, rapeseed, palm oil, etc.)
- Second generation (Biodiesel produced from jatropha, mahua, cassava, miscanthus, jojoba oil, salmon oil, tobacco seed, straw, etc.)
- Third generation (Biodiesel produced from microalgae)

The first generation Biofuels can assure the energy security and healthy environment. But the production of first generation Biofuels needs arable agricultural lands. Consequently, it may impact on global food security. As a large portion of land is required for global total fuel demand, it also may cause of deforestation. The second generation Biofuels is produced from non-edible components. It is intended to produce from woody part of non-edible plants that do not compete with food production. However, converting the woody biomass into fermentable sugars requires sophisticated and expensive technologies for commercial production. Therefore second generation Biofuels cannot be produced economically in large scale [72]. They also need arable lands which may cause food scarcity and deforestation. Biodiesel produced from microalgae is considered as the third generation of Biofuels. Microalgae can be a sustainable renewable energy source for biodiesel to overcome the limitations of first and second generation Biofuels [72].

III. MICROALGAE

Microalgae are prokaryotic or eukaryotic photosynthetic microorganisms. Naturally they can grow rapidly in fresh or salt water due to their unicellular or simple multi-cellular structure. Because of their simple cellular structure, they are very efficient converters of solar energy. As the cells of microalgae grow in aqueous suspension, they have efficient access of water, CO₂ and other nutrients [73]. Microalgae are one of the oldest living organisms in our planet. Microalgae have more than 300000 species. Several species of them have oil content up to 80% of their dry body weight. Table 4 shows lipid contents of different microalgal species [74, 80].

Table 4. Lipid contents of different microalgal species

Microalgae species	Lipid content (% dry weight)
Botryococcus braunii	25-75
Chlorella	18-57
Chlorella emersonii	25-63
Chlorella sp.	10-48
Dunaliella sp.	18-67
Dunaliella tertiolecta	18-71
Nannochloris sp.	20-56
Nannochloropsis sp.	12-53
Neochloris oleoabundans	29-65
Phaeodactylum tricornutum	18-57
Scenedesmus obliquus	11-55
Schizochytrium sp.	50-77

Many researches proved that microalgae have many advantages for biodiesel production in comparison with other conventional feedstock. Microalgae can be either autotrophic or heterotrophic. Autotrophs use inorganic compounds as a source of carbon. Autotrophs can be photoautotrophic, using light as a source of energy, or chemoautotrophic, oxidizing inorganic compounds for energy. Heterotrophs use organic compounds for growth. Heterotrophs can be photoheterotrophs, using light as a source of energy, or chemoheterotrophs, oxidizing organic compounds for energy [73]. Figure 1 shows different stages of production of microalgal biodiesel.

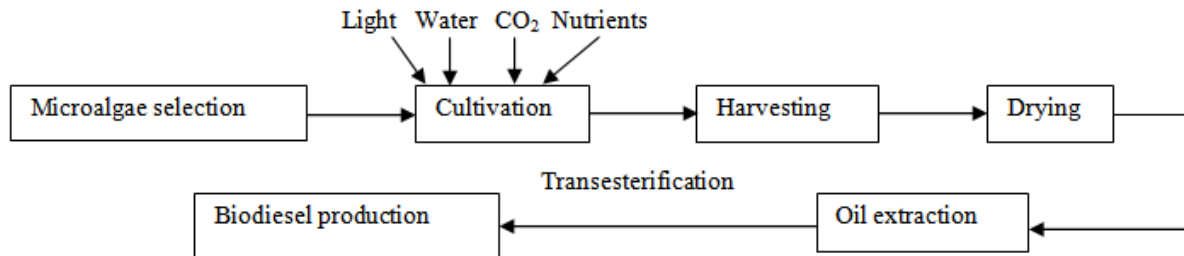


Figure 1. Different stages of production of microalgal biodiesel

3.1 Microalgal biodiesel creditability

Microalgae can be considered as a sustainable energy source of next generation biofuels [81]. Microalgae are capable of producing oil all year long. Oil productivity of microalgae is greater compared to conventional crops [82]. The oil content of microalgae is in the range of 20-50% which is greater than other competitors. Microalgae produce 15-300 times more oil for biodiesel production than traditional crops on an area basis. Biodiesel production from algal lipid is non toxic and highly biodegradable. Microalgae can grow in high rates which can be 50 times more than that of switchgrass, which is the fastest growing terrestrial crop [83]. They can complete an entire growth cycle in every few days via photosynthesis that converts sun energy into chemical energy. Microalgae have higher photon conversion efficiency; it is approximately 3-8% against 0.5% for terrestrial plants. Microalgae do not compete for land with food crops [84, 85]. They grow in fresh water, seawater, waste water or non-arable lands [86-88]. Therefore, they have minimal environmental effect such as deforestation. So microalgae are an alternative fuel feedstock that could avoid fuel versus food conflict [89]. The cultivation of microalgae needs less water than other energy oil crops. Table 5 shows comparison of different sources of biodiesel [90-100].

Table 5. Comparison of different sources of biodiesel

Biodiesel source	Oil yield (Liter oil/ha)	Land use (m ² /GJ)	Energy (GJ/ha)	Water required (m ³ /GJ)
Soybean	446	689	15	383
Rapeseed	1190	258	39	383
Palm oil	5906	52	192	75
Sunflower	951	323	31	61
Jatropha	1896	162	62	396
Microalgae	24355-136886	2-13	793-4457	<379

Production of biodiesel from microalgae can fix CO₂ [101-103]. Roughly 1kg of algae biodiesel fixes 1.83 kg of CO₂. Microalgae cultivation has a higher CO₂ mitigation rate between 50.1 ± 6.5% on cloudy days and 82.3 ± 12.5% on sunny days for different algal species [104]. Some of the microalgae species are very efficient in capturing of CO₂ from high CO₂ streams such as flue gases. The CO₂ content in flue gases is usually 5-15%. The cultivation of *Chlorella* sp. in 55 m² culture area photo bioreactor mitigates 10-50% of CO₂ from flue gas (CO₂ content 6-8% by volume) [104]. Therefore, microalgae have the ability of decarbonization of flue gases. The cultivation of microalgae can utilize nitrogen and phosphorus as nutrients from waste water sources. So microalgae can give the additional benefit of wastewater bioremediation. Moreover, microalgal biodiesel can reduce the emission of NO_x. Microalgae produce valuable co-products or byproducts such as H₂, ethanol, biopolymers, proteins, cosmetic products, carbohydrates, fertilizer, animal feed, biomass residue etc. [105]. Microalgae cultivation does not require fertilizer, herbicides and pesticides. The heating value of Microalgal biodiesel is more than that of other terrestrial plants. The high heating value of biodiesel derived from rapeseed or soybean is 37 MJ/kg, while biodiesel derived from microalgae is 41 MJ/kg [106]. Table 6 shows properties of petroleum based diesel and microalgal biodiesel [107].

Table 6. Properties of petroleum based diesel and microalgal biodiesel

Energy source	Density (at 15°C) Kg / m ³	Kinematic viscosity (at 40°C) mm ² / s
Diesel	836	3.03
Microalgal biodiesel	919	33.06

3.2 Limitations of microalgal biodiesel

Microalgae have low biomass concentration due to the limit of light penetration of algal cells. Therefore the cost of Microalgal biodiesel production is relatively higher compared to other feedstock. The drying process of harvested microalgae would be an energy consuming process due to the large water content. The heating value of Microalgal biodiesel is lower than that of petroleum based diesel fuel [108].

IV. CONCLUSION

Microalgal biodiesel is potentially alternative sustainable green energy. It is possible to produce microalgal biodiesel to satisfy the fast growing energy demand within the restraints of land and water resources. Microalgal farming can be coupled with flue gas CO₂ mitigation and wastewater treatment. Microalgae can produce a large variety of novel byproducts. Microalgae biodiesel is not yet economically viable enough to replace petroleum based fuels or compete with other renewable energy technologies such as wind, solar, geothermal and other forms of Bioenergy. Despite their high potential both in terms of productivity and sustainability, most algae based biofuel concepts still require significant investment to become commercially viable.

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