Titanium Dioxide/Phosphorous-Functionalized Cellulose Acetate Nanocomposite Membranes for DMFC Applications: Enhancing Properties and Performance

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ABSTRACT: This study intends to provide new TiO$_2$/phosphorous-functionalized cellulose acetate (Ph-CA) nanocomposite membranes for direct methanol fuel cells (DMFCs). A series of TiO$_2$/Ph-CA membranes were fabricated via solution casting technique using a systematic variation of TiO$_2$ nanoparticle content. Chemical structure, morphological changes, and thermal properties of the as-fabricated nanocomposite membranes were investigated by FTIR, TGA, SEM, and AFM analysis tools. Further, membranes’ performance, mechanical properties, water uptake, thermal-oxidative stability, and methanol permeability were also evaluated. The results clarified that the ion-exchange capacity (IEC) of the developed nanocomposite membranes improved and reached a maximum value of 1.13 and 2.01 meq/g at 25 and 80 °C, respectively, using TiO$_2$ loading of 5 wt % compared to 0.6 and 0.81 meq/g for pristine Ph-CA membrane at the same temperature. Moreover, the TiO$_2$/Ph-CA nanocomposite exhibited excellent thermal stability with appreciable mechanical properties (49.9 MPa). The developed membranes displayed a lower methanol permeability of 9.8 × 10$^{-10}$ cm$^2$ s$^{-1}$ compared to 1.14 × 10$^{-9}$ cm$^2$ s$^{-1}$ for Nafton 117. The obtained results suggested that the developed nanocomposite membranes could be potentially applied as promising polyelectrolyte membranes for possible use in DMFCs.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a proton conductive material, proton exchange membrane (PEM) is a critical part of the fuel cell system for transferring protons and acting as a barrier to fuel cross-leaks between the electrodes.$^1$ The most extensively used PEMs currently used in DMFC are the perfluorosulfonic acid type such as DuPont’s Nafton.$^2$ Nafton exhibits high proton conductivity as well as good physical and chemical stabilities.$^3,4$ However, alternative nonperfluorinated materials$^5$–$^7$ have been developed to overcome the drawbacks of Nafton such as high cost, low conductivity and stability at high temperatures, and methanol crossover.$^8$–$^{11}$ Among these, cellulose derivatives have received much attention due to their low-cost production, availability, eco-friendliness, and ease of modification.$^{12}$–$^{14}$ Cellulose acetate (CA) is commonly used to synthesize membranes due to its varied solubility in an extensive range of aprotic-polar organic solvent.$^{15}$ Cellulose acetate is a semicrystalline-thermoplastic insoluble in water but swells due to the existence of hydrophilic −OH and acetyl groups.$^{16}$ The CA membrane is also designated by better transport features and outstanding film-forming property with high hydrophilicity. CA has been physiochemically modified via cross-linking, grafting, sulfonation, amination, and composite formation to widen its applications range such as fuel cell,$^{17}$ water treatment, and desalination and biomedical fields.$^{18}$

The polymeric–inorganic composite membranes have attracted significant attention owing to their dual functionality, such as specific chemical reactivity, mechanical properties, thermal stability of the inorganic backbone, and flexibility of the organic polymer backbone.$^{19}$ Among these inorganic materials, TiO$_2$ is considered a good hydrophilic filler for improving the mechanical properties and maintaining an appropriate hydration degree for the polymeric membranes.$^{20}$ Besides, TiO$_2$ has good compatibility with organic solvents, allowing the formation of homogeneous and stable dispersion without aggregation. Therefore, incorporating TiO$_2$ into the membrane matrix positively impacts their characteristics, due to its strong interaction with polymer structures.$^{21}$ Recently, organic/inorganic membrane composites have been considered for DMFC for increasing the cell performance, such as sulfonated SiO$_2$/sulfonated polyether sulfone,$^{22}$ sulfonated polysulfone/TiO$_2,$$^{23}$ sulfonated PAMPS/PSSA-TiO$_2$/SPEEK,$^{24}$ S-TaS$_2$/SPEEK,$^{25}$ etc.

Received: January 31, 2021
Accepted: June 15, 2021
Published: July 1, 2021
Herein, TiO$_2$/phosphorous-functionalized cellulose acetate (Ph-CA) nanocomposite membranes were successfully fabricated via the solution casting technique. The as-fabricated membranes were characterized using several characterization tools. Also, ion-exchange capacity, oxidative stability, mechanical properties, solvent uptake, and swelling were explored. Moreover, methanol crossover and performance were also evaluated.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2.1. Size Analysis of TiO$_2$ NPs. The TiO$_2$ particle size distribution was estimated using a mixture of distilled water and ethanol as a solvent. The average particle size of TiO$_2$ was found to be 62 nm.

2.2. FTIR Analysis. FTIR spectroscopy was used to perceive the interactions between the functionalized CA and TiO$_2$ NPs. FTIR spectra of the native CA, Ph-CA membrane, and TiO$_2$/Ph-CA nanocomposite membranes with different NPs concentrations are shown in Figure 1. The results indicated that the spectra of all of the tested samples have corresponding peaks of CA. It was observed that the synthesized nanocomposite membranes do not show any new peaks or a significant shifting of peaks. This behavior validates that TiO$_2$ NPs do not have chemical interactions with the functionalized polymer chains. As shown in the figure, the observed absorption band at 3426 cm$^{-1}$ in pure CA, which corresponds to OH$^-$ groups, was slightly shifted to a lower wavelength at 3414 cm$^{-1}$ in Ph-CA due to the free OH$^-$ groups through the phosphorylation process. After the addition of TiO$_2$, the observed OH peak was shifted to a higher wavelength of 3484–3532 cm$^{-1}$. However, increasing TiO$_2$ NPs loading in the polymer matrix up to 10 wt % caused a decrease in the intensity of OH groups (3031 cm$^{-1}$). Besides, the peaks around 1753 cm$^{-1}$ (for CA), 1755 cm$^{-1}$ (for Ph-CA), and 1744–1746.6 cm$^{-1}$ (for TiO$_2$/Ph-CA nanocomposites) were assigned to the stretching vibrations of the carbonyl group (C=O). The observed absorption bands at 1382.87, 1373, and 1384 cm$^{-1}$ for CA, ph-CA, and TiO$_2$/Ph-CA nanocomposites were ascribed to the CH$_2$ bending vibration, respectively. The two peaks at 1230 and 1049 cm$^{-1}$ in the spectrum of the ph-CA membrane assigned to the stretching vibrations C–O–C groups were slightly moved to 1239–1244.13 and 1047.38–1094.64 cm$^{-1}$ in the nanocomposite membranes, respectively.

2.3. Morphological Changes. The surface morphology and cross section were examined by SEM analysis, as shown in Figure 2. The images clarified that the surface of native CA and Ph-CA membranes exhibited a smooth surface, and no cracks were found. Simultaneously, it changed to a roughly porous surface with irregular clusters and small granules in nanocomposite membranes. Also, membranes with a lower concentration of TiO$_2$ NPs displayed denser structure (Figure 2c), while higher TiO$_2$ NP contents caused the more significant formation of macrovoids and more porous structures (Figure 2d,e). It was also noted that using surface modification and ultrasonication led to a decrease in the particle size and minimizing the particle agglomeration, which deduced the uniform dispersion of TiO$_2$ NPs. Likewise, the surface properties of nanosized TiO$_2$ composite materials have been investigated by others. Li et al. reported that TiO$_2$ NPs were uniformly distributed with an irregular shape in the nanocomposite films, improving the mechanical properties. Furthermore, Yoshihi et al. stated the slightly rough surfaces of TiO$_2$ thin films with micro/NPs. Besides, the SEM images conducted by Zhu et al. revealed the uniform incorporation of TiO$_2$ NPs in the chitosan-based coating membranes with uneven shapes.

The resulting micrographs of both two- and three-dimensional tapping mode of the developed nanocomposite membranes are illustrated in Figure 3. Figure 3a shows an AFM image for the pristine TiO$_2$/Ph-CA membrane (without TiO$_2$ fillers), with the dark region corresponding to the hydrophilic phosphonate groups (soft structure) and the bright phase being attributed to the hydrophobic polymer matrix (hard structure). Figure 3b demonstrates an AFM image of the top surface morphology for the TiO$_2$/Ph-CA-5 nanocomposite membrane, reflecting the random distribution of TiO$_2$ NPs with some well dispersion and aggregates. The presence of the filler in the nanocomposite membranes led to surface roughness, proportional to the concentration of filler added to the polymer matrix, and the surface roughness parameters were $R_h = 5.96$ nm and $R_q = 7.88$ nm for zero-loaded Ph-CA membrane and $R_h = 13.73$ nm and $R_q = 17.32$ nm for TiO$_2$/Ph-CA-5 nanocomposite membrane. However, when the TiO$_2$ content was 10 wt %, large aggregates or chucks occurred at an interface region with a layer structure. Consequently, the amount of polymer vs TiO$_2$ NPs should be controlled to obtain a well-dispersed and uniform nanocomposite membrane. From the images, it was clear that the compatibility between the polymer and TiO$_2$ is good.

2.4. Thermal Properties. Table 1 displays the thermal stability of the developed membranes. It was clear that native CA and Ph-CA membranes recorded a maximum weight loss of 4.61 and 8.46% at the ambient temperature (0–120 °C) due to water vaporization at the initial degradation stage. On the
other hand, the weight loss increased with increasing TiO$_2$ content in the membrane matrix and reached maximum values ranging from 9.5 to 12.33% due to the high affinity of TiO$_2$ for trapping water molecules. In contrast, the developed nano-composite membranes displayed better thermal stability with increasing temperature than native CA and Ph-CA. It was observed that the temperatures required for CA and Ph-CA to lose their half weights were 360.85 and 334.47 °C, while higher temperatures were needed in the case of nanocomposite membranes (i.e., 480–541 °C). Therefore, the entrapment of TiO$_2$ in the membrane matrix improved their thermal properties. These observations could be ascribed to the increase in membrane rigidity upon the addition of TiO$_2$ as a result of the strong interaction between the polymer chains and TiO$_2$ NPs. These interactions are expected to delay the breakdown of CA chains and prevent the leaching of TiO$_2$ from the membrane matrix. Also, the probable coordination bond between Ti$^{4+}$ and the acetate group of Ph-CA and the formation of hydrogen bonds among the accessible OH$^-$ and acetate groups could be a reason for the higher thermal stability of the nanocomposite samples.

2.5. IEC, Water Uptake, and Swelling Ratio. The most critical parameters in determining membranes’ hydrophilic nature are water uptake (WU), swelling ratio, and IEC. Water acts as the carrier that transports protons through membranes, while excessive WU may lead to dimensional instability. The water content (Table 2) of the nanocomposite membranes decreased with increasing the TiO$_2$ NP loading incorporation up to 10 wt %. These observations could be due to the distribution of the inorganic NPs that decrease the unoccupied volume and the swelling capability of the membrane. The water uptake values were increased with increasing temperature from 25 to 80 °C due to the smooth penetration of water molecules into the membrane matrix, reflecting positively on their swelling aptitude. In agreement with these observations, Amjadi et al. declared comparable trends for the WU of composite membranes prepared from Nafton and SiO$_2$. Amjadi et al. stated that WU increases with temperature owing to the increase in the specific volume. In amorphous polymers, mainly in temperatures closer to and above the polymer glass transition temperature ($T_g$), the free volume significantly influences the specific volume. Thus, a higher free volume induces greater water sorption.

It is well known that the electrochemical properties of the PEMs mainly depend on IEC and water uptake profiles. Table 1 illustrates the values of experimental (IEC$_{exp}$) and calculated (IEC$_{cal}$) for the nanocomposite membranes upon the addition of TiO$_2$ NPs at 25 and 80 °C. It was clear that there was a slight change in the IEC value of the fabricated composite membrane compared with the TiO$_2$ free membrane. Similar to water uptake, increasing TiO$_2$ NP content from 5 to 10 wt % caused a decrease in the IEC$_{exp}$ value from 1.13 to 0.82 meq/g at 25 °C and from 2.01 to 1.42 meq/g at 80 °C in TiO$_2$/Ph-CA-5 compared to TiO$_2$/Ph-CA-10 membrane due to the existence of a freer phosphonic group. Moreover, increasing the nanosized TiO$_2$ content covering the polymer backbone’s active sites and reduces the adequate number of replaceable ion-exchangeable sites.

Further, it was found that the ion-exchange process can be influenced by several factors, including the type of membranes, temperature, concentration, and pH. The results showed that the IEC changes vastly by increasing the temperature from 25 to 80 °C. This behavior may be explained by the increase in the specific volume and water absorption and by the fact that the affinity of the membrane increases with increasing charge (z) of the counterion because of the attractive electrostatic attraction among the counterions and functional groups. This phenomenon is called electroselectivity, and this affinity for the

![Figure 2](https://doi.org/10.1021/acsomega.1c00568)
metal ions increases with increasing temperature. Other authors reported similar results.41

On the other hand, dimensional changes in the thickness and dimensions of the TiO2/Ph-CA nanocomposite membranes were assessed in their dry state with the hydrated state. At the cathode side, membranes can interact with water when assembled in the FC system. Still, they can be swelled due to the absorbed water molecules that may affect protons’ diffusional resistivity. Consequently, the ionic conductivity of the employed PEM could diminish. Thus, the measurements of swelling of TiO2/Ph-CA membranes were examined at 25 and 80 °C. Table 2 reveals the decrease in the membrane swelling with increasing TiO2 NP loading, which indicated that the swelling character is mainly influenced by the polymer nature and the polymer–solvent compatibility.42 However, the swelling performance plays a notable role in mass transfer, ion exchange, and ionic interaction.43

### 2.6. Oxidative Stability and Mechanical Property

Thermal-oxidative stability is a crucial character for PEMs to achieve extended durability and a long working lifetime for the FC system.44 For the nanocomposite membranes described above, oxidative stability was considered using hot Fenton’s

**Table 1. Weight Loss Percentage of TiO2/Ph-CA Nanocomposite Membranes and IEC Values**

| sample code | weight loss (%) at ambient temperature (0–120 °C) | $T_\text{exp}$ (°C) | IEC$_\text{cal}$/IEC$_\text{exp}$ (25 °C) | IEC$_\text{cal}$/IEC$_\text{exp}$ (80 °C) |
|-------------|------------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| CA          | 4.61                                     | 360.85          | 0.324/0.203                     | 0.419/0.386                     |
| Ph-CA       | 8.46                                     | 334.27          | 0.629/0.6                       | 0.849/0.81                      |
| TiO2/Ph-CA-2.5 | 9.5                                 | 480.58          | 0.983/0.9                       | 1.529/1.4                       |
| TiO2/Ph-CA-5 | 10.12                                   | 520.06          | 1.436/1.3                       | 2.320/2.1                       |
| TiO2/Ph-CA-7.5 | 10.88                                 | 536.27          | 1.122/1.0                       | 1.795/1.6                       |
| TiO2/Ph-CA-10 | 12.33                                   | 541.34          | 0.912/0.8                       | 1.482/1.3                       |

**Table 2. Swelling Ratio and Water Uptake of the Prepared TiO2/Ph-CA Nanocomposite Membranes**

| TiO$_2$ (wt %) | dimensional changes ($\Delta L$ %) | thickness changes ($\Delta T$ %) | water uptake (WU %) |
|----------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|
|                | 25 °C  | 80 °C  | 25 °C  | 80 °C  | 25 °C  | 80 °C  |
| 0              | 10.25  | 12.8   | 13.05  | 13.46  | 22.5   | 47.7   |
| 2.5            | 9.31   | 11.67  | 12.81  | 13.00  | 24.3   | 49.5   |
| 5              | 8.56   | 9.20   | 11.59  | 12.08  | 23.1   | 48     |
| 7.5            | 6.00   | 7.11   | 11.07  | 11.54  | 22.8   | 46.9   |
| 10             | 4.44   | 5.95   | 10.35  | 10.77  | 21     | 46.54  |

**Figure 3.** Two- and three-dimensional surface AFM images of (a) TiO2/Ph-CA-0.0 and (b) TiO2/Ph-CA-5 nanocomposite membrane.
reagent as an accelerated chemical degradation test to evaluate their stabilities against the radical species. This test was assessed for 12 and 24 h by measuring the weight loss as presented in Table 3. The results illustrated that the nanocomposite membranes showed more stability after the addition of TiO2 NPs owing to the role of TiO2 in the interaction against the diffusion of H2O2.45

2.7. Contact Angle Analysis. The hydrophilic/hydrophobic behavior of the fabricated membranes can be specified by measuring their contact angle against water droplets. The contact angles of nanocomposite membranes in addition to the original CA and free loaded ph-CA membranes are tabulated in Table 4. Obviously, with the addition of TiO2 nanoparticles, the contact angle of the TiO2/Ph-CA nanocomposite membranes was decreased from 35.5° for the pristine zero-filled Ph-CA membrane to 32.7° for the TiO2/Ph-CA-5 membrane. On the other hand, a further increase in the TiO2 content above 5 wt % causes a decrease in the hydrophilic character. This investigation supports that nanocomposite membranes demonstrated decent hydrophilic character, which indicates the clear phase separation between the cellulosic membrane and nano-filler.26

Table 3. Accelerated Test Results of TiO2/Ph-CA Nanocomposite Membranes

| sample code          | retained weight (%) |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| Ph-CA                | 67.00 58.70         |
| TiO2/Ph-CA-2.5       | 86.03 76.51         |
| TiO2/Ph-CA-5         | 89.46 79.79         |
| TiO2/Ph-CA-7.5       | 91.13 81.60         |
| TiO2/Ph-CA-10        | 91.80 82.92         |

Table 4. Contact Angle Measurement of TiO2/Ph-CA Nanocomposite Membranes and Mechanical Properties

| sample code          | 2θ  | strain (%) |
|----------------------|-----|------------|
| CA                   | 47.04 | 2.64       |
| Ph-CA                | 35.5 | 8.26       |
| TiO2/Ph-CA-2.5       | 33.2 | 7.75       |
| TiO2/Ph-CA-5         | 32.7 | 6.78       |
| TiO2/Ph-CA-7.5       | 37.7 | 4.45       |
| TiO2/Ph-CA-10        | 40.02 | 2.64       |
| Nafton 117           | 110 | 12.2       |

The mechanical properties of the membranes mentioned above were investigated to illustrate the effect of TiO2 NPs on the membranes’ performance stability in fuel cells. Thus, tensile strength (Figure 4) and elongation at break (Table 4) were determined. It was clear that the tensile strength was enhanced upon the addition of TiO2 NPs in the synthesized membranes to reach a maximum value of 58 MPa at 7.5 wt % of TiO2 compared to 37.7 and 18.2 MPa for zero-loaded membranes and Nafton. On the contrary, elongation at break was reduced from 8.26 to 2.64% due to the significant interaction between the nano-filler and functionalized cellulose acetate matrix. Further, the TiO2 content increases up to 10 wt %, causing a marked decline in the membranes’ tensile strength; since the filler at this content could not be uniformly dispersed, agglomeration occurred.42

Figure 4. Mechanical properties of TiO2/Ph-CA nanocomposite membranes.

2.8. Methanol Permeability. To further illustrate the possible use of the prepared TiO2/Ph-CA nanocomposite membranes as PEMs, methanol permeability was measured at 25 °C. Figure 5 demonstrates the nanocomposite membrane’s methanol permeability coefficient with different TiO2 contents than the Nafton membrane. The results clarified that methanol permeability decreased from 2.27 × 10−16 cm² s⁻¹ for the plain membrane to 1.25 × 10−16 and 9.8 × 10−16 cm² s⁻¹ for the TiO2/Ph-CA-2.5 and TiO2/Ph-CA-5 nanocomposite membranes, respectively. Lower methanol permeability proposes minor methanol crossover through the PEM, which indicates that the TiO2/Ph-CA nanocomposite membranes could adequately protect the cathode catalyst from poisoning.

The methanol permeabilities of nanocomposite membranes with 7.5 and 10 wt % nano-filler contents were 2.1 × 10−16 and 3.5 × 10−16 cm² s⁻¹, respectively. A similar trend was stated by Jiang et al.46 The higher methanol permeability of the TiO2/Ph-CA-0.0 membrane than those of the TiO2/Ph-CA-2.5 and TiO2/Ph-CA-5 membranes may suggest that the holey-phosphonated structure could increase the interlayer spacing of the functionalized membrane, resulting in an increase in methanol diffusion through the membranes. Furthermore, at
lower TiO$_2$ NP contents (2.5, 5 wt %), the hydrophilic TiO$_2$ NPs primarily restricted the methanol crossover. In addition, TiO$_2$ NPs are likely involved in the cellulosic backbone (hydrophobic semicrystalline matrix) and caused aggregation of particles, which will alter the microstructure of the membrane and further change the methanol transport mechanism. The methanol permeation increased through the hydrophobic domains at higher TiO$_2$ contents (7.5, 10 wt %). In agreement with this result, Wu et al. reported a similar investigation. These results suggest that the TiO$_2$/Ph-CA nanocomposite membranes could be used as the PEM with great potential to replace Nafion 117 (1.14 × 10$^{-9}$ cm$^2$ s$^{-1}$).

2.8.1. Membrane Performance. Membrane efficiency is a direct indication of the membrane performance in DMFC. The efficiency factor as a function of TiO$_2$ NPs content at 25 °C is indicated in Figure 6. The results demonstrate that the efficiency factor reaches a maximum peak at 5 wt % TiO$_2$ NPs load, which then decreases as the IEC decreased by a further increase in the TiO$_2$ NP content. Furthermore, the performance factor for all TiO$_2$/Ph-CA nanocomposite membranes was high compared to that of Nafion 117 as its performance efficiency is 2.6 × 10$^7$.

3. CONCLUSIONS

A series of TiO$_2$/Ph-CA nanocomposite membranes were successfully fabricated with various TiO$_2$ NPs as PEMs via the casting technique. Morphological analysis exhibits proper adhesion between the inorganic nanoparticle domains and the polymer matrix; thus, the surface morphology and mechanical properties were greatly improved. Characterization of the nanocomposite membranes using TGA proved their high thermal stability compared to the native and functionalized CA membranes. The results indicated that increasing the TiO$_2$ NP content up to 10 wt % in the TiO$_2$/Ph-CA nanocomposite membranes causes a decrease in the water uptake, swelling ratio, and IEC, i.e., the IEC reached its maximum value (1.13 meq/g) at 5 wt % TiO$_2$ concentration. Moreover, thermal-oxidative stability, mechanical properties, methanol permeability, and membrane performance were investigated to estimate their aptitude applicability in FC. It was clear that the entrapment of TiO$_2$ resulted in significant reductions in the methanol permeability compared to that of Nafion 117 membranes. Further, TiO$_2$/Ph-CA nanocomposite membranes showed the best cell performance associated with excellent thermal stability. Thus, the fabricated cost-effective nanocomposite membranes are predictable to be alternative candidates for the commercial Nafion membranes in DMFC applications. However, more long-term-based characteristics and performance are requisite assurance.

4. EXPERIMENTAL SECTION

4.1. Materials. Cellulose acetate (CA; degree of acetylation 40%), orthophosphoric acid (OPA; assay 98%), acetone (purity; 90%), epichlorohydrin (ECH; purity 99.5%), and titanium isopropoxide (Ti(OiPr)$_4$) were supplied by Sigma-Aldrich (Germany). Methanol (purity 99%) and ethanol (purity; 99.8%) were purchased from Fluka Chemie GmbH (Switzerland). Hydrochloric acid (assay; 37%) was provided by Polskie Odczynniki Chemiczne S.A. (Finland). Sodium chloride, sodium hydroxide, and hydrogen peroxide are analytical grades supplied by El-Gomhouria Co (Egypt).

4.2. Preparation of Nanosized TiO$_2$. Nanosized TiO$_2$ was synthesized by a sol–gel method. In brief, Ti(OiPr)$_4$ (8 mL, 27 mmol) was dissolved in ethanol (82 mL) under nitrogen gas and then added dropwise at room temperature to a solution of ethanol/water (250 mL, 1:1 v/v) under constant stirring for 10 min. After that, the solution was filtered, and the obtained white precipitate was dried at 100 °C for 15 h.

4.3. Preparation of TiO$_2$/Ph-CA Nanocomposite Membrane. In a typical synthesis, CA (10 wt %) was first dissolved in acetone and then activated with ECH (1.3 wt/v) for 12 h at 55 °C. The activated CA was then reacted with OPA (0.5 M) for 8 h in a water bath at 35 °C. After completing the reaction, appropriate amounts of TiO$_2$ nanoparticles (0.0, 2.5, 5.0, 7.5, and 10.0 wt %) were added to the functionalized polymer solution and mixed for 1 h in an ultrasonic bath. The resulting solution was cast in a glass Petri dish and dried overnight at 60 °C. The obtained membranes were washed several times with deionized water to eliminate the unreacted ECH and OPA and then stored in deionized water before testing. The nanocomposite membranes were coded as TiO$_2$/Ph-CA-0.0, TiO$_2$/Ph-CA-2.5, TiO$_2$/Ph-CA-5, TiO$_2$/Ph-CA-7.5, and TiO$_2$/Ph-CA-10, respectively.

4.4. Characterization and Membrane Properties. The nanoparticle size of TiO$_2$ was determined using a particle size analyzer (N5 submicron particle size analyzer, Beckman Coulter). The structural analysis of nanocomposite membranes was conducted using an FTIR spectrometer (Shimadzu FTIR-8400 S, Japan). The thermal stability of the membranes was investigated using a thermogravimetric analyzer (Shimadzu TGA-50, Japan) for a temperature range of 25–600 °C at a heating rate of 20 °C/min under nitrogen. Further, morphological changes were also examined using scanning electron microscopy (Joel Jsm 6360LA, Japan). The AFM device was a scanning probe microscope (Shimadzu SPM-9700). Small squares of the prepared membranes were cut and glued on glass substrate. The membrane surfaces were imaged in a scan size of 10 μm × 10 μm. The most used surface roughness parameters of the membranes, which are expressed in terms of the mean roughness ($S_a$) and root mean square of the Z data ($S_q$), were investigated.

4.4.1. Water Uptake and Swelling Ratio. Water uptake measurements were performed in batches at different temperatures by recording the weight changes between the dried and hydrated states. Before measurements, membranes with an area of 2 cm × 2 cm were dried in a vacuum oven at 120 °C for...
24 h. Weighed dry films were then immersed in deionized water at 25 and 80 °C for 24 h till equilibrium. The additional water was carefully wiped off with tissue paper, and the membranes were then weighed directly. The experiments were conducted at least three times, and the results were expressed as mean values.

\[
WU (\%) = \frac{W_w - W_d}{W_d} \times 100
\]

where \( W_d \) and \( W_w \) are the weights of membranes in the dry and hydrated states, respectively.

The dimensional stability of the nanocomposite membranes was assessed by immersing the films in water for 24 h at various temperatures. The changes in thickness and length were calculated using the following equations:

\[
\text{thickness change (ΔT %)} = \frac{T_w - T_d}{T_d} \times 100
\]

\[
\text{dimensional change (ΔL %)} = \frac{L_w - L_d}{L_d} \times 100
\]

where \( T_d \) and \( L_d \) are the thickness and length of the dry membranes, while \( T_w \) and \( L_w \) are the thickness and length measured in the hydrated state, respectively.

4.4.2. Ion-Exchange Capacity. The ion-exchange capacity (IEC) of the nanocomposite membranes was evaluated using classical acid–base titration. Briefly, weighed membranes were immersed in NaCl solution (2 M) for at least 12 h at 25 and 80 °C to replace H+ with Na+. Then, the replaced protons were titrated with NaOH (0.1 M) using ph.ph as an indicator. IEC was determined as follows:

\[
\text{IEC (m eq/g)} = V_{NaOH} \times \frac{C_{NaOH}}{W_d}
\]

where \( V \) and \( C \) are the volume and concentration of the NaOH solution, respectively, and \( W_d \) is the membrane weight.

4.4.3. Oxidative Stability. Nanocomposite membrane of uniform size (2 cm × 2 cm) was soaked in Fenton’s reagent (4 ppm FeSO4 in 3% H2O2) at 80 °C. The oxidative stability was evaluated by recording the percentage of remains weight (RW %) after 12 and 24 h, where the Fenton’s reagent changed every 10 h.

4.4.4. Contact Angle Measurement. A contact angle meter (VCA 2500 XE equipped with a CCD camera and analysis software, AST Products, Billerica, MA) was utilized for investigating the wettability of the nanocomposite membranes by measuring its surface contact angle against water droplet at three different points within 20 s. A drop of water was carefully dropped on the sample surface, and the images were captured using the attached camera.

4.4.5. Methanol Permeability Measurements. The methanol permeability was determined employing a glass diffusion cell consisting of two identical compartments separated by the test membrane. One compartment (A) was filled with the feed (2 M methanol solution), and the other compartment (B) was charged with the permeate (deionized water), each with a volume of 100 mL. Before the test, the samples were soaked in deionized water for at least 24 h. Both compartments were kept magnetically agitated during the permeation experiment; 500 μL was withdrawn periodically at prescribed time intervals from the permeate compartment using a microsyringe, and the methanol concentration was measured vs time via an HPLC analyzer. All measurements were conducted at 25 °C, and the methanol permeability \( P \) was calculated from the slope of the linear plot of methanol concentration against permeation time as follows:

\[
P = \frac{\alpha V_B}{A} \frac{L}{C_A}
\]

where \( \alpha \) is the straight-line plot slope, \( V_B \) is the straight line plot slope, \( V_B \) is the sample volume, \( L \) is the sample thickness, and \( A \) is the membrane working area.

### 4.4.5.1. Membrane Efficiency Determination. DMFCs required PEMs with high proton conduction and less methanol permeability. The membrane performance assessment can be performed as follows:

\[
\phi = \frac{\sigma}{P}
\]

where \( \phi \) is a parameter that estimates the overall membrane performance in the ionic conductivity \( (\sigma) \) to methanol permeability \( (P) \) ratio. Herein, the IEC was used as an indicator for ionic conductivity. Thus, the performance of the TiO2/Ph-CA nanocomposite membranes was compared with that of the original Ph-CA membrane and Naion 117, according to the following equation:

\[
\phi = \frac{IEC}{P}
\]

4.4.6. Mechanical Properties. The tensile strength and elongation at break of the prepared nanocomposite membranes were measured at room temperature using the universal testing machine (Shimadzu UTM, Japan). Each sample (1.5 cm × 5 cm) was measured three times, and the mean values were reported at a constant 5 mm/min speed.

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Author Contributions
The manuscript was written through contributions of all authors. All authors have given approval to the final version of the manuscript.

Notes
The authors declare no competing financial interest.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
The authors are thankful to the Polymer materials research department, Advanced Technologies and New Materials Research Institute (ATNMR), City of Scientific Research and Technological Applications (SRTA-City), New Borg El-Arab City, for characterization and experimental facilities.

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