

Amitav Ghosh's Oceanic Vision: The Ibis Trilogy as a Reimagining of History

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Abstract

This article examines how Amitav Ghosh's Ibis trilogy—*Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, and *Flood of Fire*—reimagines oceanic history through the narrative possibilities of the novel. It argues that the conventional realist novel, with its emphasis on linear chronology, localized settings, and sustained character development, often struggles to represent the expansive networks and movements that shape maritime history. Ghosh responds to this challenge by extending and reshaping the realist form to narrate the history of the nineteenth-century opium trade across the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Rather than following a single, linear trajectory, the trilogy adopts a broad, interconnected narrative structure that accommodates multiple locations, communities, and historical experiences. In doing so, it reconstructs the intertwined histories of colonialism, commerce, migration, and cultural exchange while revealing the tensions and contradictions embedded within imperial

expansion. Although Ghosh's work has frequently been read through the lenses of radical politics and historiographic fiction, the trilogy resists such singular classifications. Instead, it presents a nuanced historical vision that balances large-scale historical processes with detailed representations of individual lives, places, and encounters. The article contends that Ghosh's reworking of the realist novel offers an alternative narrative model for writing oceanic history without sacrificing the richness of historical detail or literary realism.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh; Ibis trilogy; oceanic history; opium trade; realism; historiographic fiction.

Introduction

The sea has emerged as a significant site of inquiry in postcolonial studies, shifting critical attention from nation-centred histories to the transnational networks that shaped colonial modernity. Maritime spaces reveal histories of trade, migration, cultural exchange, and imperial expansion that cannot be adequately understood within the confines of territorial boundaries. The Indian Ocean, in particular, occupies a central place in this discourse, serving for centuries as a dynamic arena where people, commodities, languages, and ideas moved across continents. Amitav Ghosh's Ibis trilogy—*Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015)—revisits this oceanic world to reconstruct the intertwined histories of the opium trade, indentured labour, and British imperialism.

Set between 1838 and 1841, the trilogy follows an ensemble of characters whose lives intersect through the voyages of the ship Ibis. Farmers, convicts, merchants, sailors, soldiers, and traders from India, China, Europe, and America collectively reveal the human dimensions of colonial commerce. Rather than presenting history through the perspective of imperial administrators or official archives, Ghosh foregrounds the experiences of ordinary individuals whose lives were profoundly shaped by the economic and political forces of empire. The Indian Ocean consequently becomes more than a geographical setting; it

functions as a historical space where cultures interact, identities evolve, and unequal power relations become visible.

Ghosh's representation of history is inseparable from his choice of narrative form. While the realist novel traditionally emphasizes chronological progression, localized settings, and individual experience, the vast geographical and cultural scope of the Indian Ocean demands a more expansive narrative structure. The Ibis trilogy responds to this challenge by connecting multiple locations, communities, and historical trajectories within a single narrative framework. As a result, the novels privilege spatial relationships alongside temporal progression, enabling readers to perceive colonial history as an interconnected network rather than a sequence of isolated national events. Through this narrative strategy, Ghosh demonstrates that literary fiction can illuminate dimensions of the past that remain fragmented or absent in conventional historical records.

Existing scholarship has examined the trilogy from perspectives such as postcolonialism, historiographic fiction, globalization, migration, and environmental humanities. Scholars including Sugata Bose, Françoise Lionnet, Claire Chambers, and Isabel Hofmeyr have highlighted the significance of the Indian Ocean as a space of mobility, cultural interaction, and historical exchange. However, comparatively less attention has been paid to the ways in which Ghosh reshapes the realist novel itself to narrate oceanic history. This study addresses that gap by examining how the trilogy expands the formal possibilities of historical fiction through its spatial imagination and transoceanic perspective.

This article argues that the Ibis trilogy reimagines oceanic history by adapting the realist novel to represent the expansive networks of empire, commerce, and migration across the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. By integrating historical events with the experiences of marginalized individuals, Ghosh challenges conventional models of historical narration and offers an alternative literary framework for understanding colonial modernity.

The trilogy thus demonstrates that the novel can serve not only as a repository of historical memory but also as a critical medium for rethinking the relationship between history, space, and human experience.

Objectives

This study examines how Amitav Ghosh's Ibis trilogy reimagines oceanic history through the narrative possibilities of the realist novel. It analyses the trilogy's representation of the Indian Ocean as a transnational space shaped by colonial trade, migration, and cultural encounters. The article further investigates how Ghosh integrates historical documentation with fiction to reconstruct marginalized histories and expand the narrative scope of historical fiction.

Scope and Methodology

This study focuses on Amitav Ghosh's Ibis trilogy—*Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015)—to examine how the novels reconstruct the history of the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean world. Particular attention is given to Ghosh's representation of the opium trade, maritime mobility, colonial commerce, and cross-cultural encounters as interconnected historical processes.

The study adopts a qualitative textual analysis grounded in postcolonial literary criticism and oceanic studies. It draws upon the theoretical insights of Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Isabel Hofmeyr, while engaging with Sugata Bose's concept of the Indian Ocean as a space of interconnected histories. Close reading serves as the primary analytical method, enabling an examination of narrative structure, characterization, spatial imagination, and historical representation. Relevant secondary scholarship is incorporated to situate Ghosh's contribution within contemporary debates on historiographic fiction and maritime history.

Rather than treating the trilogy solely as historical fiction, this study analyses it as a literary reimagining of oceanic history that expands the formal possibilities of the realist novel.

Literature Review

Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy has generated substantial scholarly interest for its engagement with colonial history, maritime networks, and the Indian Ocean world. Critics have examined the trilogy through postcolonial, historical, and transnational perspectives, emphasizing its reconstruction of the nineteenth-century opium trade and its critique of imperial capitalism. Collectively, these studies recognize Ghosh's contribution to recovering marginalized histories that remain largely absent from official colonial archives.

The concept of the Indian Ocean as a space of interconnected histories provides an important framework for understanding the trilogy. Sugata Bose describes the Indian Ocean as a region shaped by continuous movement, exchange, and cultural interaction that transcends national boundaries (Bose 6–8). Likewise, Isabel Hofmeyr views the ocean as a dynamic site of circulation where histories are produced through mobility rather than territorial divisions (Hofmeyr 3–5). These perspectives illuminate the spatial imagination that underpins Ghosh's narrative.

Scholars have also highlighted Ghosh's blending of historical research and fiction. His novels reconstruct the experiences of convicts, indentured labourers, sailors, merchants, and migrants, demonstrating how literary narratives can recover voices overlooked in official records. Claire Chambers argues that while the trilogy imagines new forms of social and cultural solidarity, these possibilities remain constrained by the realities of colonial power (Chambers 32–35). Similarly, Françoise Lionnet interprets the ship *Ibis* as a creolized space where diverse cultures and languages converge, reflecting the fluid nature of the colonial Indian Ocean (Lionnet 102).

Although these studies have enriched our understanding of the trilogy, they primarily focus on themes such as colonialism, migration, identity, and globalization. Comparatively little attention has been given to the relationship between Ghosh's narrative form and his representation of oceanic history. Addressing this gap, the present study examines how the Ibis trilogy reshapes the realist novel to narrate the spatial complexity of the Indian Ocean world. It argues that Ghosh's narrative strategy offers an alternative literary framework for understanding the interconnected histories of empire, trade, and migration.

Analysis and Discussion

Amitav Ghosh's Ibis trilogy marks a significant departure from conventional historical fiction by relocating history from the territorial boundaries of the nation to the fluid expanse of the Indian Ocean. Rather than treating the sea as a passive geographical setting, Ghosh transforms it into an active historical archive where commerce, migration, violence, and cultural encounters converge. The trilogy demonstrates that the history of the nineteenth century cannot be understood through political events alone; it must also account for the movements of ordinary people whose lives were shaped by imperial trade and maritime mobility. In doing so, Ghosh redefines the possibilities of the realist novel, adapting it to narrate histories that extend across continents and cultures.

The scale of this narrative ambition is acknowledged by Ghosh himself in the epilogue to *Flood of Fire*. Reflecting on the completion of the trilogy, he writes:

The unfortunate reality, however, is that ten years of diligent application have so far succeeded in advancing the narrative by only four years: from 1838 to 1841. Such being the case, with nearly a century's worth of events still to come, the author is compelled to acknowledge that it is highly unlikely that he will be able, in the years that remain to him, to provide a full account of the archive's survival and of the adventures and descendants of its members. (*Flood of Fire* 608)

This remarkable admission extends beyond an author's note on the writing process. It reveals Ghosh's awareness of the formal limitations involved in representing oceanic history through the novel. The Indian Ocean is not confined by national borders or a single historical narrative; it encompasses numerous voyages, languages, ports, and communities whose histories unfold simultaneously. A conventional realist narrative, structured around linear chronology and a limited geographical setting, struggles to accommodate such vast historical complexity. Ghosh therefore reshapes the realist tradition by privileging spatial interconnectedness over temporal continuity. Instead of attempting to narrate an exhaustive history of empire, he reconstructs a brief but decisive historical moment whose repercussions extend across oceans and generations.

This spatial reorientation becomes evident from the opening pages of *Sea of Poppies*. Deeti, an impoverished woman from a village in Bihar, has never seen the sea. To her, it exists only as an object of fear and imagination:

Her village was so far inland that the sea seemed as distant as the netherworld. No one she knew had ever seen the kala-pani, the Black Water; to her it was as remote as the place where the gods and demons lived, and as forbidding. (*Sea of Poppies* 3)

The passage initially presents the sea through inherited cultural beliefs rather than direct experience. The kala-pani represents exile, ritual pollution, and irreversible separation from one's homeland. Yet Ghosh deliberately introduces this image at the beginning of the trilogy because the sea will eventually overturn these assumptions. What begins as a symbol of social exclusion gradually becomes a space of transformation, where caste distinctions weaken, linguistic boundaries blur, and new relationships emerge. Deeti's crossing of the kala-pani is therefore not merely a physical journey; it signifies the movement from a localized worldview to an oceanic consciousness. Her personal transformation parallels the novel's broader movement from regional history to transnational history.

The ship *Ibis* functions as the central symbol of this transformation. Before carrying indentured labourers across the Indian Ocean, it had served as a slave ship in the Atlantic. Although the nature of its cargo changes, the structures of exploitation remain remarkably similar. The conversion of the *Ibis* from transporting enslaved Africans to transporting indentured Indians establishes an important historical continuity between different systems of colonial labour. Rather than treating slavery and indenture as isolated phenomena, Ghosh reveals them as interconnected manifestations of imperial capitalism. The ship thus becomes a floating archive that preserves the memory of colonial violence even as it carries new generations towards uncertain futures.

Françoise Lionnet describes the *Ibis* as "a microcosm of the creolizing dynamics" of the colonial world (Lionnet 102). Her observation captures the novel's emphasis on cultural interaction, yet the significance of the ship extends beyond cultural hybridity. On board the *Ibis*, individuals from diverse linguistic, religious, and social backgrounds are compelled to negotiate new forms of coexistence. Bhojpuri-speaking peasants, Bengali zamindars, Parsi merchants, Chinese traders, European sailors, and African seamen occupy the same maritime space. The ocean dissolves rigid social boundaries without erasing historical inequalities. Instead, it creates conditions under which identities become fluid while remaining deeply shaped by colonial power.

The symbolic relationship between the sea and imperial commerce is further reinforced through the image of the poppy. Towards the close of *Sea of Poppies*, Deeti contemplates a single poppy seed and arrives at a profound realization:

She had never thought to ask herself why the sahibs wanted so much of this substance that they were forever urging its cultivation upon the people. It was not the planet above that governed her life: it was this minuscule orb, nestled in the palm of her hand. This was her Shani, her Saturn. (*Sea of Poppies* 307)

The metaphor transforms the poppy seed into the governing force of colonial history. Traditionally, Shani signifies destiny shaped by planetary influence. Ghosh replaces this cosmological belief with the material realities of imperial commerce. Human lives are determined not by celestial bodies but by the economic machinery of the opium trade. A tiny seed cultivated in the fields of Bihar generates commercial networks stretching across the Indian Ocean to Canton, eventually contributing to international conflict. The image encapsulates the trilogy's central insight: global history often emerges from seemingly insignificant local realities.

Sugata Bose argues that the Indian Ocean should be understood as a region of "interlinked histories" rather than isolated national narratives (6). Ghosh's trilogy embodies this idea through its narrative structure. Characters seldom remain confined to a single location; their journeys connect India, Mauritius, China, Hong Kong, and the wider maritime world. These movements reveal that the histories of empire, commerce, migration, and cultural exchange are fundamentally interconnected. By adapting the realist novel to represent these transoceanic relationships, Ghosh demonstrates that literary fiction can illuminate dimensions of history that conventional historiography frequently overlooks. The ocean consequently emerges not as the margin of history but as one of its principal stages.

While *Sea of Poppies* introduces the Indian Ocean as a space of displacement and transformation, *River of Smoke* expands this vision by foregrounding the intricate commercial and cultural networks that connected India, China, and Europe during the nineteenth century. The novel shifts its primary setting from the voyage of the Ibis to the bustling trading enclave of Canton, where merchants, sailors, interpreters, botanists, artists, and smugglers converge. Rather than depicting Canton merely as a commercial centre, Ghosh reconstructs it as a cosmopolitan contact zone in which diverse languages, cultures, and economic interests constantly intersect. The city becomes a microcosm of the Indian Ocean world, revealing that

colonial modernity was sustained as much through transnational commercial exchanges as through military conquest.

The commercial activity represented in the novel is inseparable from the circulation of opium. Although the trade generates immense wealth for European merchants, Ghosh consistently exposes its devastating social and moral consequences. Bahram Modi, one of the principal traders in *River of Smoke*, recognizes both the prosperity and the ethical ambiguity that accompany his profession. His internal conflicts reflect the contradictions of a colonial economy in which individual success is inseparable from collective suffering. Ghosh therefore avoids reducing historical actors to simple categories of oppressor and victim. Instead, he portrays colonial commerce as a complex system that implicates merchants, intermediaries, colonial officials, and local elites alike.

The scale of this commercial network becomes evident through the multilingual environment of Canton. English, Bengali, Bhojpuri, Hindustani, Cantonese, Pidgin English, and several other languages coexist within the same urban space. Communication frequently depends upon translation, negotiation, and cultural adaptation. Rather than presenting linguistic diversity as an obstacle, Ghosh treats it as evidence of an interconnected maritime world where identities remain fluid and continually evolving. The linguistic texture of the trilogy consequently challenges the monolingual assumptions of the traditional realist novel. Language itself becomes an archive of oceanic encounters, preserving traces of migration, trade, and cultural exchange across generations.

Françoise Lionnet argues that the Indian Ocean produces "creolized" cultural formations that resist rigid national identities (102). Ghosh's representation of Canton exemplifies this process. The city cannot be understood through a single cultural or political perspective because it is constituted by overlapping networks of exchange. Parsis from Bombay negotiate with British merchants; Chinese traders interact with Indian financiers;

European botanists depend upon local intermediaries for knowledge of plants and commerce. These encounters reveal that colonial history emerged through collaboration, conflict, and negotiation rather than through unilateral imperial control. Ghosh thus shifts attention away from empire as a purely political institution towards the everyday relationships that sustained global commerce.

One of the novel's most significant achievements lies in its reconstruction of the interconnected histories of commodities and people. The movement of opium across the Indian Ocean is accompanied by the movement of sailors, labourers, traders, and migrants whose lives become inseparable from the commodity they transport. The ocean therefore functions not simply as a route of commercial exchange but as a living space where economic history acquires human dimensions. Every shipment of opium carries with it stories of displacement, aspiration, exploitation, and survival. Ghosh repeatedly reminds readers that commodities do not travel independently; they circulate through the labour and lives of countless individuals whose contributions remain largely absent from official histories.

This emphasis on ordinary lives distinguishes Ghosh's historiographic practice from conventional imperial narratives. Instead of privileging governors, military commanders, or colonial administrators, the trilogy repeatedly returns to merchants, lascars, translators, artisans, and indentured labourers. Their experiences reveal that history is produced not only through state policy but also through the everyday interactions of people who occupy the margins of official archives. In recovering these overlooked voices, Ghosh demonstrates the capacity of fiction to complement historical writing by reconstructing experiences that documentary evidence often leaves incomplete.

Isabel Hofmeyr observes that the Indian Ocean should be understood through "circulation" rather than fixed territorial boundaries (3–5). This insight resonates throughout *River of Smoke*, where movement itself becomes the organizing principle of the narrative.

Characters, languages, commodities, and ideas remain in constant motion, resisting the stability that characterizes conventional realist fiction. Ghosh consequently reimagines historical narration through spatial mobility rather than chronological succession. The Indian Ocean emerges as an interconnected cultural world whose history cannot be confined within national borders or imperial archives.

By centring the narrative on maritime commerce and cosmopolitan interaction, *River of Smoke* broadens the scope of the trilogy beyond the voyage of the Ibis. It demonstrates that oceanic history is not merely the story of ships and trade routes but also of languages, relationships, and cultural encounters that continually reshape human experience. The novel therefore strengthens Ghosh's larger project of reimagining history through an oceanic perspective, where movement rather than territorial permanence becomes the defining characteristic of the colonial world.

If *Sea of Poppies* introduces the ocean as a space of transformation and *River of Smoke* expands its commercial and cultural networks, *Flood of Fire* confronts the political consequences of those networks. The outbreak of the First Opium War marks the culmination of the trilogy's historical trajectory, exposing the violence that underpinned imperial commerce. Rather than portraying the war as a diplomatic conflict between Britain and China, Ghosh reveals it as the inevitable consequence of an economic system driven by the opium trade. The novel shifts attention away from military victories and imperial strategies to the lives of soldiers, labourers, traders, and civilians who bear the human cost of colonial expansion.

Among the trilogy's most compelling voices is Kesri Singh, whose experiences as an Indian soldier in the British army expose the contradictions of colonial loyalty. Having witnessed the devastation caused by war, Kesri reflects:

So much death; so much destruction; so much pain and suffering. And all for what? For the right to force a poison on people who did not want it? Could there ever be a viler cause for a war? (*Flood of Fire* 505)

Kesri's questions are not merely expressions of personal anguish; they constitute Ghosh's ethical critique of imperial ideology. The rhetoric of "free trade," repeatedly invoked by British officials, is stripped of its moral legitimacy when viewed through the experiences of those compelled to fight for it. The passage exposes the contradiction at the heart of colonial modernity: an empire that justified its civilizing mission while waging war to protect the commercial circulation of narcotics. By presenting the conflict through the consciousness of an Indian sepoy rather than a colonial administrator, Ghosh reorients historical perspective from the imperial centre to its colonial margins.

The ethical force of the trilogy arises from its persistent recovery of voices neglected by official historiography. Throughout the three novels, history is narrated not through governors, generals, or diplomats but through peasants, lascars, convicts, translators, merchants, and soldiers. Their stories reveal dimensions of colonial experience that remain largely invisible in state archives. Ghosh does not reject historical documentation; instead, he questions its silences. Fiction becomes a means of reconstructing lives that have been fragmented or erased by colonial records.

This historiographic approach is consistent with Ghosh's reflections in *In an Antique Land*. Discussing the fragmentary nature of historical evidence, he observes:

It is uncertain whether this man was Bomma, whether he came from India, or whether he travelled with Ben Yiju. The documents do not permit certainty; they offer only fragments from which a life may be imagined. (*In an Antique Land* 286)

The passage reveals Ghosh's philosophy of historical writing. Rather than claiming complete authority over the past, he acknowledges the limits of archival evidence and the necessity of imaginative reconstruction. Such an approach distinguishes his fiction from conventional historical narratives that often privilege documentary certainty. The Ibis trilogy similarly fills the gaps left by colonial archives, not by inventing history arbitrarily but by imaginatively connecting scattered historical traces into coherent human experiences. Fiction thus complements historiography by recovering emotional and cultural realities that official documents rarely preserve.

This method also explains the trilogy's distinctive narrative architecture. The three novels resist the expectation of a single protagonist or a unified national history. Instead, multiple narrative strands intersect across oceans, reflecting the complex networks through which empire operated. Individual stories remain incomplete when read in isolation, yet together they reveal the larger historical processes linking India, China, Britain, Mauritius, and Southeast Asia. The narrative itself mirrors the movement of the Indian Ocean, where countless routes intersect without converging into a single centre. Ghosh's realism therefore depends not on chronological completeness but on the representation of interconnected historical relationships.

Burton observes that Ghosh's historical imagination seeks to recover "submerged histories" that conventional archives fail to record (Burton xx). The Ibis trilogy exemplifies this endeavour by foregrounding the experiences of those who occupy the margins of imperial history. Whether through Deeti's migration, Bahram's commercial dilemmas, Neel's transformation, or Kesri's moral awakening, the novels reveal that history is shaped as much by ordinary lives as by political events. The Indian Ocean consequently emerges as a shared historical space where commerce, migration, conflict, and cultural exchange converge to produce alternative histories of colonial modernity.

The trilogy ultimately demonstrates that history is not a fixed record preserved within imperial archives but a dynamic process continually reconstructed through memory, narrative, and human experience. By combining meticulous historical research with imaginative storytelling, Ghosh expands the formal possibilities of the realist novel and challenges conventional modes of writing history. His oceanic vision neither replaces historical scholarship nor competes with it; rather, it complements archival history by restoring the voices, journeys, and relationships that official records frequently overlook. In this sense, the Ibis trilogy succeeds not simply as historical fiction but as a profound literary reimagining of oceanic history, where the sea functions simultaneously as archive, witness, and agent of historical transformation.

Findings

The study demonstrates that Amitav Ghosh's Ibis trilogy reimagines oceanic history by extending the formal possibilities of the realist novel beyond nation-centred historical narratives. The analysis reveals that the Indian Ocean functions not merely as a geographical setting but as a dynamic historical archive that connects the intertwined histories of colonialism, commerce, migration, and cultural exchange. Through its transnational narrative structure, the trilogy foregrounds the experiences of marginalized communities whose lives remain largely absent from official colonial records. The study further finds that Ghosh's integration of historical research with imaginative reconstruction enables fiction to recover the human dimensions of the opium trade and the First Opium War without compromising historical authenticity. By privileging spatial interconnectedness over linear chronology, the Ibis trilogy offers an alternative mode of narrating history, demonstrating that literary fiction can meaningfully complement conventional historiography in representing the complexities of the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean world.

Limitations and Research Gaps

This study is confined to Amitav Ghosh's Ibis trilogy and examines it primarily through the perspectives of oceanic history, postcolonial studies, and narrative form. While the analysis highlights the trilogy's reimagining of the Indian Ocean world, it does not undertake a comparative study of other maritime narratives or oceanic literatures. Likewise, issues such as environmental humanities, ecocriticism, translation, multilingualism, and gender are discussed only where they directly contribute to the central argument. Future research may explore these dimensions through comparative analyses with other Indian Ocean writers or by examining Ghosh's wider oeuvre, including *In an Antique Land*, *The Hungry Tide*, and *Gun Island*. Such approaches would further illuminate the intersections of oceanic history, environmental concerns, cultural mobility, and literary form in Ghosh's writing.

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's Ibis trilogy reimagines the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean world by bringing together history, fiction, and maritime space within an expansive narrative framework. Rather than treating the ocean as a passive backdrop, Ghosh presents it as a dynamic historical arena where commerce, migration, cultural exchange, and imperial power intersect. Through the interconnected experiences of diverse characters, the trilogy moves beyond nation-centred histories to recover the lives of those marginalized in official colonial narratives.

This study has shown that Ghosh extends the formal possibilities of the realist novel to represent the spatial and historical complexity of the Indian Ocean. By combining historical research with imaginative reconstruction, he offers a nuanced account of the opium trade and the First Opium War while exposing the limitations of colonial historiography. His

fiction complements historical records by restoring voices and experiences that archives often overlook.

The trilogy also broadens the scope of postcolonial historical fiction by foregrounding transnational mobility and interconnected maritime histories. In doing so, it challenges conventional understandings of history and demonstrates that literary narratives can serve as meaningful sites of historical inquiry. Ultimately, Ghosh's oceanic vision redefines the relationship between literature and history, affirming the novel's enduring capacity to recover forgotten pasts and illuminate the human experiences embedded within oceanic worlds.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of all the authors, declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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