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REIMAGINING MYTH AND TRADITION IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE: NEGOTIATING MODERNITY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

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Keywords	Abstract
Myth, Tradition, Indian English Literature, Cultural Identity, Postcolonial Hybridity.	Contemporary Indian English literature has witnessed a sustained and diverse engagement with myth, epic, and folk tradition, ranging from feminist revisionist retellings of the Mahabharata and Ramayana to popular mythological fiction, allegorical historical fiction, and dramatic reworkings of Sanskrit and folk narrative sources. This paper examines how contemporary Indian English writers reimagine myth and tradition not as nostalgic retreat but as an active, contested site through which modernity, gender, caste, political history, and cultural identity are negotiated. Drawing on myth criticism, postcolonial theory, and Indian literary scholarship, the paper undertakes a qualitative, thematic analysis of selected major works — including Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's <i>The Palace of Illusions</i> , Kavita Kane's <i>Karna's Wife</i> , Salman Rushdie's <i>Midnight's Children</i> , Amish Tripathi's <i>Shiva Trilogy</i> , Ashok Banker's <i>Ramayana</i> series, Girish Karnad's <i>Hayavadana</i> and <i>Naga-Mandala</i> , and Arundhati Roy's <i>The God of Small Things</i> — organised around four recurring strategies: feminist mythological revisionism, myth as political and historical allegory, popular reinvention of epic narrative, and dramatization of folk tradition. The paper argues that these texts collectively demonstrate what Homi Bhabha terms cultural hybridity: myth and tradition are continuously reworked, translated, and contested rather than rejected or



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	preserved unchanged, becoming a flexible discursive resource through which writers negotiate inherited narrative and modern consciousness. The paper concludes that this reimagining constitutes a distinctive, ongoing feature of Indian English literary production, with significant implications for how cultural identity is narrated in a postcolonial, globalising literary marketplace.
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1. Introduction

Myth and tradition have never occupied a settled or singular place in Indian English literature. From the earliest decades of the Indian English novel, writers have turned to the vast narrative reservoirs of the Sanskrit epics, the Puranas, regional folk tale traditions, and devotional literature, not merely as source material but as a living discursive resource capable of being reshaped to address the concerns of successive literary generations. What distinguishes the contemporary moment — broadly, Indian English writing since the 1980s, and especially since the early 2000s — is the sheer diversity and self-consciousness with which this engagement has unfolded: feminist writers have returned to the Mahabharata and Ramayana to recover the interior lives of marginalised female characters; popular fiction has reimagined the gods themselves as flesh-and-blood protagonists within reconstructed historical settings; playwrights have drawn on folk and Kathasaritsagara narrative structures to interrogate modern anxieties about identity and desire; and novelists working in more realist or magical-realist modes have deployed myth as historical and political allegory.

This proliferation raises a set of questions this paper takes as its central concern. What cultural work does the retelling of myth perform in a literature written primarily in English, for readerships that span India's English-educated middle class and an international, often diasporic, audience? Is the contemporary turn to myth best understood as a gesture of cultural recovery and resistance to Western literary modernity, or as itself a thoroughly modern, market-inflected literary strategy, or as something that eludes this binary altogether? And how do these retellings negotiate the frequently uncomfortable relationship between tradition's inherited social hierarchies — of gender, caste, and political order — and the more critical, often explicitly feminist or subaltern, consciousness of the writers reworking them?

This paper argues that contemporary Indian English literature's engagement with myth and tradition is best understood neither as simple continuity with, nor as simple rejection of, inherited narrative and cultural authority, but as an ongoing, unresolved negotiation — a process closely aligned with what postcolonial theory has termed cultural hybridity. Myth, in the hands of contemporary Indian English writers, becomes less a fixed repository of tradition than a flexible narrative technology, continuously reopened, translated, and contested, through which questions of modern identity, gender, and political history are worked out. The paper develops this argument through a qualitative thematic analysis of a purposively selected set of major contemporary texts, organised around four recurring strategies of mythic reimagining that recur across the genre.

2. Review of Literature

The critical study of myth as a literary and cultural category owes its foundational vocabulary to Northrop Frye's (1957) *Anatomy of Criticism*, which proposed that myth constitutes the structural substratum underlying all literary narrative, and to Joseph Campbell's (1949) *The Hero with a*



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Thousand Faces, whose account of the monomyth — the hero's cyclical journey of departure, initiation, and return — has proven a durable, if contested, framework for analysing epic and quest narrative across cultures. Mircea Eliade's (1963) work on myth and religious experience further argued that myth functions not as primitive error but as a mode of sacred, paradigmatic narrative through which societies continually re-enact and renew their foundational meanings, a formulation particularly relevant to understanding why Indian writers return so persistently to the Mahabharata and Ramayana rather than treating them as closed historical texts.

Within Indian literary scholarship specifically, A. K. Ramanujan's (1991) influential essay “Three Hundred Ramayanas” demonstrated that the Ramayana has never existed as a single authoritative text but as a vast, plural narrative tradition continuously retold, translated, and reimagined across language, region, and community — a scholarly intervention this paper treats as directly enabling the contemporary retellings it examines, since it establishes textual plurality and reinterpretation as intrinsic to the epic tradition itself rather than a modern departure from it. Wendy Doniger's (2009) study of Hindu mythological and textual traditions similarly emphasised the coexistence of multiple, often contradictory, narrative strands within what is retrospectively treated as a unified tradition, providing further scholarly warrant for reading contemporary mythological fiction as continuous with, rather than a rupture from, the plural textual history of Indian myth.

On the specifically postcolonial and Indian English literary side, Meenakshi Mukherjee's (1971; 2000) landmark studies of the Indian English novel traced the genre's long negotiation between inherited narrative form and an English-language medium historically associated with colonial education, arguing that the Indian English novel has always been marked by a productive tension between vernacular cultural material and a borrowed literary language — a tension this paper's texts inherit and intensify. Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) concept of cultural hybridity, developed in *The Location of Culture*, provides this paper's central theoretical framework: for Bhabha, postcolonial cultural production does not simply oscillate between an authentic native tradition and an imposed colonial modernity but generates a hybrid “third space” in which both are continuously translated and transformed through their encounter with one another, precisely the dynamic this paper identifies in contemporary myth-based Indian English fiction. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) foundational essay on subaltern voice further informs this paper's attention to the feminist revisionist texts examined in Section 6.1, which can themselves be read as an attempt to recover narrative voice for female epic characters historically rendered peripheral or silent within canonical retellings.

More recent Indian English literary scholarship has begun to attend specifically to the contemporary mythological fiction boom. Makarand Paranjape's (2000; 2012) writing on Indian English literature and cultural nationalism has examined how contemporary writers negotiate the competing pulls of cosmopolitan literary modernity and indigenous cultural assertion, a framework this paper draws on in Sections 6.3 and 7 to situate the popular mythological fiction of writers such as Amish Tripathi within a broader cultural politics of Hindu identity and market-driven publishing rather than treating it as a purely literary phenomenon. Taken together, the literature reviewed here establishes three things this paper builds upon directly: first, that Indian mythological narrative has always been structurally plural and open to retelling, rather than a fixed tradition contemporary writers depart from; second,



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that Bhabha's hybridity offers the most productive theoretical lens for understanding how this retelling negotiates tradition and modernity without resolving into either; and third, that existing scholarship has not yet brought a systematic, comparative thematic framework to bear across the full range of contemporary strategies — feminist revisionism, political allegory, popular epic reinvention, and dramatic folk adaptation — that this paper undertakes to examine together.

3. Objectives of the Study

- To examine the range of strategies through which contemporary Indian English writers reimagine myth and tradition in their fiction and drama.
- To analyse selected major texts of feminist mythological revisionism and their recovery of marginalised female voices from the Mahabharata and Ramayana traditions.
- To examine the use of myth as political and historical allegory in contemporary Indian English fiction.
- To analyse the popular reinvention of epic narrative in contemporary mythological fiction and its relationship to market and genre conventions.
- To examine the dramatization of folk and Sanskrit narrative tradition in contemporary Indian English theatre.
- To situate these strategies within the theoretical framework of postcolonial cultural hybridity, and assess their implications for the negotiation of modernity and cultural identity in contemporary Indian English literature.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in close textual analysis, situated within the combined theoretical frameworks of myth criticism and postcolonial literary theory. The study does not employ quantitative or statistical methods, as its object of enquiry — the thematic and discursive strategies through which literary texts rework mythic and traditional material — is properly addressed through interpretive textual analysis rather than measurement.

4.2 Selection of Texts

Primary texts were selected through purposive sampling on the basis of three criteria: sustained critical and popular recognition within contemporary Indian English literature; substantive, structurally significant engagement with myth, epic, or folk tradition rather than incidental allusion; and collective coverage of the diverse generic modes — literary fiction, popular mythological fiction, and drama — through which this engagement occurs. The resulting corpus includes Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2013), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* (2010–2013), Ashok Banker's *Ramayana* series (2003–2006), Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* (1971) and *Naga-Mandala* (1988), and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), read alongside secondary and supporting reference to other relevant contemporary works where thematically pertinent.



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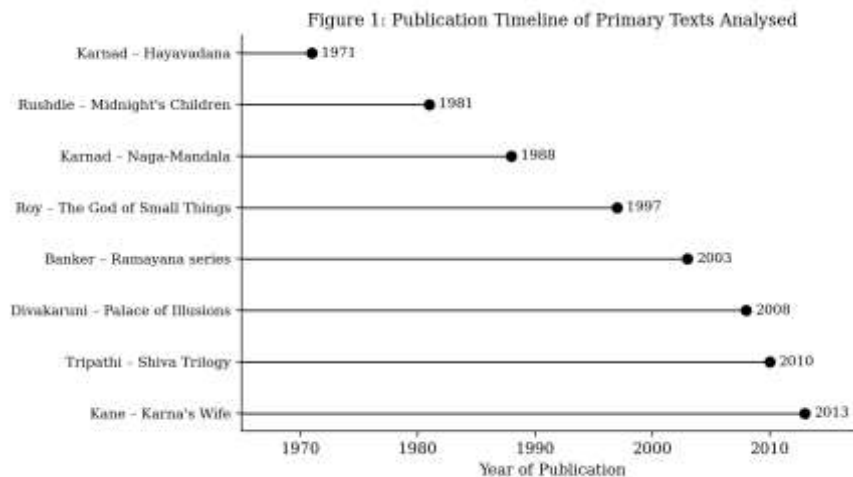


Figure 1. Publication timeline of the eight primary texts analysed, spanning Karnad's *Hayavadana* (1971) to Kane's *Karna's Wife* (2013).

4.3 Analytical Framework

Textual analysis proceeds thematically rather than chronologically, organised around four recurring strategies identified through preliminary reading of the corpus: feminist mythological revisionism, myth as political and historical allegory, popular reinvention of epic narrative, and dramatization of folk tradition. Each strategy is analysed with reference to Bhabha's (1994) concept of cultural hybridity and, where relevant, to Ramanujan's (1991) account of narrative plurality within the Indian epic tradition, Frye's (1957) and Campbell's (1949) frameworks of myth criticism, and Spivak's (1988) attention to subaltern voice.

5. Theoretical Framework: Myth, Hybridity, and the Postcolonial Negotiation of Tradition

This paper's analysis rests on the convergence of two theoretical traditions. The first, myth criticism as developed by Frye (1957), Campbell (1949), and Eliade (1963), treats myth not as a discrete, bounded genre but as a structural and functional mode of narrative meaning-making that persists across historical and cultural transformation, continually reactivated and reworked rather than left behind by literary modernity. Applied to the Indian context, and reinforced by Ramanujan's (1991) demonstration of the Ramayana tradition's inherent textual plurality, this framework suggests that contemporary retellings are less a departure from an authentic mythic past than a continuation of myth's constitutive openness to retelling.

The second, Bhabha's (1994) postcolonial theory of cultural hybridity, provides the paper's organising interpretive lens. Bhabha argues that postcolonial cultural production characteristically occupies a hybrid "third space" in which coloniser and colonised, tradition and modernity, are not simply opposed but mutually constituted and continuously translated through their encounter with one another. Applied to contemporary Indian English literature's engagement with myth, this framework suggests that the texts examined in this paper should not be read as choosing between an authentic indigenous tradition and an imported Western literary modernity — whether in narrative form, feminist consciousness, or commercial genre convention — but as actively producing new, hybrid cultural meanings from the



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sustained encounter between the two. It is this hybrid, unresolved quality, rather than any single resolution in favour of tradition or modernity, that this paper identifies as the defining feature of contemporary Indian English myth-based writing.

6. Strategies of Reimagining Myth and Tradition

This section undertakes the paper's core textual analysis, organised around four recurring strategies through which the selected texts rework myth and tradition.

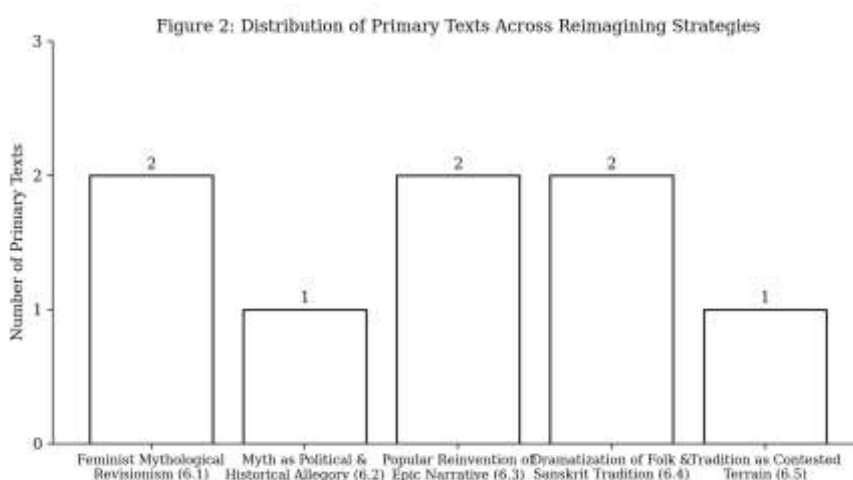


Figure 2. Distribution of the primary texts across the four reimagining strategies discussed in Section 6, with Roy's more critical engagement (6.5) shown separately.

6.1 Feminist Mythological Revisionism

The most sustained and critically prominent strand of contemporary mythic reimagining is feminist revisionist retelling, which recovers narrative voice for female characters rendered peripheral, silent, or morally simplified within canonical epic tradition. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) retells the Mahabharata from the first-person perspective of Draupadi, reframing the epic's central political and military conflicts through her interiority, desire, and agency, and in doing so foregrounding questions — of polyandrous marriage, of complicity and resistance within a patriarchal political order, of the costs borne by women within a war narrated as heroic by men — that canonical retellings characteristically subordinate to the epic's martial and dharmic concerns. Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2013) performs a structurally similar recovery for Uruvi, Karna's largely unnamed wife in the traditional epic, using her perspective to interrogate the epic's caste politics and the social marginalisation of the suta (charioteer) lineage into which Karna is born.

Read through Spivak's (1988) attention to subaltern voice, these retellings can be understood as a literary project of narrative recovery, giving speech to figures the canonical tradition positions as objects of the epic's action rather than subjects of its telling. Yet, consistent with Bhabha's hybridity rather than any simple recovery of a pre-existing authentic voice, these texts do not claim to restore a silenced original perspective so much as to construct a new, explicitly modern feminist consciousness and project it backward into epic narrative space — a hybrid gesture that uses the authority and



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familiarity of myth to stage contemporary arguments about gender and agency, rather than treating myth as a fixed vessel merely awaiting a more faithful telling.

6.2 Myth as Political and Historical Allegory

A second strategy deploys mythic and quasi-mythic narrative structure as a mode of political and historical allegory. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), while not a direct epic retelling, structures its narrator Saleem Sinai's life as inseparably and often magically entangled with the birth and subsequent history of independent India, drawing on a mode of narrative excess, prophecy, and fantastic causality that self-consciously echoes epic and Puranic narrative convention even as it narrates recent political history — Partition, the Emergency, and the formation of postcolonial national identity. This deployment of a quasi-mythic narrative mode to narrate contemporary political history exemplifies Bhabha's hybrid third space with particular clarity: Rushdie's text is neither a conventional realist historical novel nor a traditional mythic narrative, but a hybrid form in which mythic narrative technique becomes the vehicle for a thoroughly modern, politically critical historical consciousness.

6.3 Popular Reinvention of Epic Narrative

A third and commercially significant strategy is the popular reinvention of epic and mythological narrative as genre fiction, exemplified by Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* (2010–2013) and Ashok Banker's *Ramayana* series (2003–2006). Tripathi's trilogy reimagines Shiva not as a deity but as a historical Tibetan immigrant warrior whose divinity is a retrospective attribution by the civilisation he comes to lead, systematically rationalising the epic's supernatural elements within a constructed historical-fantasy setting; Banker's series similarly renders the *Ramayana*'s events within a densely detailed fantasy-adventure narrative mode drawing explicitly on the conventions of contemporary epic fantasy fiction. Read alongside Paranjape's (2000; 2012) account of the cultural politics surrounding contemporary Hindu literary nationalism, this strategy raises distinct interpretive questions from the feminist and allegorical modes examined above: here, myth is reworked primarily through the conventions of a globally circulating commercial genre — fantasy and historical-adventure fiction — rather than through an oppositional or recovery-oriented literary politics, producing a hybridity that is as much about genre and market as about postcolonial cultural identity, and that has been read by some critics as more consonant with, than critical of, contemporary assertions of Hindu cultural nationalism.

6.4 Dramatization of Folk and Sanskrit Narrative Tradition

A fourth strategy, distinct in medium and narrative source, is exemplified by Girish Karnad's plays *Hayavadana* (1971) and *Naga-Mandala* (1988), which draw respectively on a tale from the Sanskrit *Kathasaritsagara* and on Kannada folk narrative tradition. *Hayavadana*'s central plot device — the accidental transposition of two men's heads and bodies, raising unresolved questions about the seat of identity, desire, and selfhood — uses a folk narrative structure to interrogate distinctly modern anxieties about the fragmented, non-unitary nature of identity, staged through a self-consciously theatrical framing device (the deity Ganesha's invocatory prologue, the sutradhara narrator figure) drawn from traditional Indian theatre conventions. *Naga-Mandala* similarly reworks a folk tale about a woman's relationship with a cobra who assumes her absent husband's form to explore female desire and agency within a constrained domestic and marital order. In both plays, Karnad's use of traditional



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narrative frame and theatrical convention to stage thoroughly modern existentialist and feminist concerns exemplifies this paper's central argument with particular formal clarity: the traditional frame is not merely decorative but becomes the very structural means through which modern thematic concerns are articulated, a hybridity operating at the level of dramatic form itself.

6.5 Tradition as Contested Terrain: The Limits of Reconciliation

Not all of this paper's texts resolve the encounter between tradition and modernity into productive hybridity without residue or cost. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), while not a mythic retelling in the manner of the texts examined above, stages a pointed and critical engagement with traditional narrative and performance through its depiction of a Kathakali performance of Mahabharata episodes, which the novel's narration frames as a debased, tourist-commodified fragment of a once-vital storytelling tradition, even as the novel's central tragedy — the transgressive love between Ammu and Velutha across caste lines — is explicitly narrated through reference to the traditional social prohibitions the novel identifies as “Love Laws,” inherited caste and gender hierarchies the narrative holds directly responsible for its characters' destruction. Roy's novel thus complicates any reading of myth and tradition's contemporary reimagining as an uncomplicated site of creative renewal: here, tradition survives into modernity not primarily as a resource for reinvention but as a persistent, coercive social structure, and the novel's engagement with mythic performance registers loss and commodification as much as creative continuity. This more critical register is itself, this paper argues, still consistent with Bhabha's hybridity — tradition here too is neither simply rejected nor simply preserved, but its costs, rather than only its creative possibilities, are what the hybrid negotiation makes visible.

7. Discussion: Cultural Identity and the Negotiation of Modernity

Read together, the strategies examined in Section 6 suggest that contemporary Indian English literature's engagement with myth and tradition cannot be adequately described by a single evaluative frame — as either straightforward cultural recovery or straightforward capitulation to market-driven genre convention, as either resistance to or complicity with modernity. Feminist revisionist retelling (Section 6.1) uses myth's cultural authority to advance an explicitly modern gender politics; political allegory (Section 6.2) borrows myth's narrative excess to render contemporary history newly legible; popular epic reinvention (Section 6.3) subjects myth to the conventions of global commercial genre fiction, with cultural-political implications that remain genuinely contested among critics; dramatic adaptation (Section 6.4) uses traditional theatrical form as the very structure through which modern existential and feminist concerns are staged; and Roy's more critical engagement (Section 6.5) registers tradition's continuing coercive social power alongside its creative potential. What unites these otherwise divergent strategies is precisely their refusal to resolve into either pure continuity with, or pure rupture from, inherited tradition — the hybrid, unresolved quality Bhabha (1994) identifies as characteristic of postcolonial cultural production.

This has significant implications for how cultural identity is narrated within contemporary Indian English literature. Rather than treating “tradition” and “modernity” as external, pre-given categories between which Indian identity must choose, the texts examined in this paper suggest that cultural



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identity is itself constituted through the ongoing, unfinished work of reworking mythic and traditional material for modern purposes. This has particular significance given the international circulation of much of this literature: written in English, and reaching readerships that span India's domestic English-educated public and a global, often diasporic, audience, these texts perform their negotiation of tradition and modernity within, and partly for, a transnational literary marketplace — a condition that intensifies rather than resolves the hybridity this paper identifies as their defining feature, since the texts must negotiate not only India's internal tensions between tradition and modernity but also the expectations and interpretive frameworks of an international readership for whom Indian myth may carry different, often more exoticised, associations.

8. Conclusion

This paper has examined how contemporary Indian English literature reimagines myth and tradition through four recurring strategies — feminist mythological revisionism, myth as political and historical allegory, popular reinvention of epic narrative, and dramatization of folk tradition — each of which negotiates, rather than resolves, the relationship between inherited cultural narrative and modern social, political, and gendered consciousness. Grounded in Ramanujan's (1991) demonstration that Indian epic tradition has always been narratively plural, and interpreted through Bhabha's (1994) framework of postcolonial cultural hybridity, this paper has argued that contemporary myth-based Indian English writing is best understood not as a choice between authentic tradition and Western modernity but as the continuous, unresolved hybrid production of new cultural meaning from their encounter. This has significant implications for how cultural identity is narrated in contemporary Indian English literature: identity emerges, across the diverse texts examined here, not as a fixed inheritance to be preserved or rejected, but as an ongoing negotiation continuously reopened with each new retelling. As Indian English literature continues to expand within an increasingly global literary marketplace, this sustained, self-renewing engagement with myth and tradition is likely to remain one of its most distinctive and critically significant features, meriting continued scholarly attention to the specific cultural, commercial, and political stakes of each new retelling.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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