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A Critical Assessment of Functionalism and Aestheticism as Frameworks for Literary Analysis

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Article Publication Details

This article is published in the **International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Bulletin**, ISSN 3108-1428 (Online) Volume 3 Issue 4 (July – Aug) 2024.

ABSTRACT

This study critically examines Functionalism and Aestheticism as frameworks for literary analysis, assessing their respective contributions, limitations, and applicability in understanding literary texts. Functionalism emphasizes the social, political, and moral dimensions of literature, considering texts as instruments for reflecting and influencing society. Aestheticism, in contrast, prioritizes artistic form, beauty, and autonomy, often detaching literary works from social and historical contexts. While each framework provides unique insights, relying exclusively on one lens results in partial and one-dimensional interpretations. Functionalist approaches may overlook stylistic, linguistic, and imaginative qualities, whereas aestheticist approaches may ignore social, cultural, and ethical relevance. Through a qualitative and comparative approach, this study analyzes selected literary texts, including works by Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, applying both frameworks to demonstrate their strengths and limitations. The analysis reveals that an integrative or eclectic approach, which combines Functionalist and Aesthetic perspectives, offers a more comprehensive understanding of literature as both an artistic creation and a social document. By highlighting the interplay between aesthetic sophistication and social significance, this study underscores the value of multi-dimensional literary criticism and contributes to contemporary debates on the purpose of literature. The findings have implications for literary scholarship, teaching, and postcolonial studies, advocating for critical approaches that balance artistic appreciation with social awareness.

Keywords: Functionalism, Aestheticism, Literary Analysis, African Literature, Literary Criticism

Introduction

Literary theory refers to the systematic study of the principles, concepts, and methods used to interpret literary texts. It provides scholars with analytical tools for understanding how literature produces meaning, reflects human experience, and interacts with social realities. Rather than treating texts as isolated artistic artifacts, literary theory situates them within broader linguistic, cultural, historical, and

ideological contexts (Eagleton, 2008). As such, literary theory has become central to modern literary studies. The importance of literary theory lies in its ability to deepen textual interpretation beyond surface-level readings. Through theoretical lenses, critics can uncover hidden meanings, ideological assumptions, power relations, and aesthetic strategies embedded in literary works. Theory enables readers to ask critical questions about authorship, representation, form, and audience, thereby enriching both academic inquiry and literary appreciation (Barry, 2017).

Literary criticism relies heavily on theory to provide coherence and rigor in analysis. Without theoretical grounding, criticism risks becoming impressionistic or subjective. Theoretical frameworks offer structured approaches that guide interpretation, ensuring consistency, comparability, and scholarly validity in literary analysis (Abrams & Harpham, 2015). The need for theoretical frameworks in literary criticism arises from the complexity of literary texts themselves. Literature often embodies multiple meanings and contradictions, shaped by social forces, artistic choices, and historical conditions. Theoretical models help critics manage this complexity by offering interpretive boundaries and methodological clarity, allowing for more systematic and persuasive analyses (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 2014).

Functionalism in literary studies emphasizes the social purpose of literature. It views literary texts as instruments that reflect, critique, or influence society by addressing moral, political, and cultural issues. From this perspective, literature is valued for its ability to educate, reform, or mobilize society, especially in contexts marked by inequality or conflict (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986). Functionalism is particularly influential in postcolonial and Marxist criticism. In contrast, Aestheticism prioritizes artistic autonomy and the intrinsic beauty of literary works. Rooted in the idea of “art for art’s sake,” this approach argues that literature should be appreciated primarily for its form, style, and imaginative power rather than its social or moral utility (Pater, 1873). Aestheticism resists reducing literature to propaganda or social commentary, emphasizing creativity and individual expression.

Functionalism and Aestheticism represent contrasting orientations in literary theory. While Functionalism foregrounds social relevance and ideological impact, Aestheticism insists on artistic independence and formal excellence. This tension reflects a long-standing debate in literary studies over whether literature should serve society or exist as an autonomous art form (Eagleton, 2008).

The ongoing debate between social function and artistic autonomy constitutes a major problem in literary criticism. Exclusive reliance on Functionalism risks reducing literature to a sociological document, overlooking aesthetic complexity. Conversely, strict Aestheticism may detach texts from their social and historical realities, limiting their interpretive depth and relevance (Barry, 2017).

Recent scholarship suggests that neither Functionalism nor Aestheticism alone can fully account for the richness of literary texts. Literature simultaneously engages social realities and aesthetic form. A purely functional reading ignores stylistic innovation, while a purely aesthetic reading neglects contextual significance. Therefore, a synthesis of both approaches allows critics to examine how form and function interact within texts (Abrams & Harpham, 2015).

This study adopts the position that while Functionalism and Aestheticism each provide valuable insights, neither framework is sufficient on its own. A balanced, integrative approach that recognizes both the social function and artistic autonomy of literature offers a more comprehensive and nuanced literary analysis. Such an approach enhances critical understanding and reflects the multidimensional nature of literary texts.

Conceptual and Theoretical Background

Literary criticism refers to the systematic analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of literary texts with the aim of understanding their meanings, structures, functions, and artistic qualities. It provides scholars with conceptual and theoretical frameworks for examining literature beyond surface-level reading, drawing attention to language, form, context, and purpose. According to Abrams (1999), literary criticism involves explaining, interpreting, and judging literary works, while Tyson (2015) emphasizes that theoretical frameworks serve as lenses that shape how texts are read and understood. These frameworks, such as formalism, functionalism, aestheticism, Marxism, feminism, and structuralism offer organized principles that guide critical inquiry and help situate literary texts within broader social, cultural, and philosophical contexts.

Historically, literary theory has evolved alongside intellectual and cultural developments. Classical literary criticism can be traced to Plato and Aristotle, whose works laid foundational ideas about imitation (mimesis), form, and the moral function of literature (Aristotle, trans. 1996). During the medieval period, criticism was largely influenced by religious and moral interpretations, while the Renaissance revived classical ideals, emphasizing humanism and artistic excellence. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries marked a turning point, as critics began to systematize theory, giving rise to diverse approaches such as formalism, structuralism, and later post-structuralism (Eagleton, 2008). This historical progression reflects a shift from prescriptive judgments about literature to more analytical and theoretical engagements with texts.

Within this evolving tradition, Functionalism and Aestheticism emerged as influential perspectives in literary studies. Functionalism views literature primarily in terms of its social, moral, and educational functions, emphasizing how literary works reflect, critique, or contribute to society (Wellek & Warren,

1977). In contrast, Aestheticism, which gained prominence in the late nineteenth century, advocates “art for art’s sake,” prioritizing beauty, form, and artistic autonomy over moral or social utility (Gaut & Lopes, 2013). While Functionalism underscores literature’s practical relevance, Aestheticism highlights its intrinsic artistic value. Together, these approaches illustrate enduring debates in literary criticism concerning whether literature should serve societal purposes or exist independently as an object of aesthetic appreciation.

Functionalism as a Framework for Literary Analysis

Functionalism in literary studies refers to a critical approach that interprets literature primarily in terms of the functions it performs within society. Rather than viewing literary works as autonomous aesthetic objects, functionalist criticism emphasizes their practical roles, such as transmitting values, reinforcing or challenging social norms, and addressing collective experiences. Wellek and Warren (1977) describe this orientation as one that links literature closely to social reality, while Eagleton (2008) argues that functionalist approaches examine how texts are shaped by, and in turn shape, historical and material conditions. Central to Functionalism is the idea that literature is embedded in social structures and must be understood in relation to its social purpose and consequences.

A key principle of Functionalism is the assumption that literature operates as a social instrument capable of reflecting and shaping society. Literary texts are seen as products of specific historical contexts, expressing dominant ideologies, class relations, and cultural values of their time (Marx & Engels, 1978). At the same time, Functionalism recognizes literature’s capacity to influence social consciousness by questioning injustice, promoting moral values, or envisioning alternative social arrangements. According to Swingewood (1972), literature both mirrors social reality and actively participates in social change, making it a powerful medium for understanding societal dynamics and conflicts.

Functionalist literary criticism draws significantly from Marxist and sociological traditions. Marxist criticism, influenced by the ideas of Karl Marx, emphasizes the relationship between literature and economic structures, focusing on class struggle, ideology, and power relations (Eagleton, 1976). Sociological criticism, associated with scholars such as Georg Lukács and Lucien Goldmann, further developed Functionalism by analyzing how literary forms and themes correspond to social groups and collective worldviews (Lukács, 1971; Goldmann, 1980). These theorists view literature as a socially conditioned activity that reveals tensions between individual experience and broader social forces.

In practice, Functionalism is applied to literary texts by examining how they function as instruments of social critique, moral instruction, or political engagement. Novels, plays, and poems are analyzed for their representations of social inequalities, cultural conflicts, and moral dilemmas, as well as for the messages

they convey to readers. For instance, functionalist readings may interpret a novel as a critique of colonialism, patriarchy, or capitalism, or as a means of promoting ethical reflection and social responsibility (Tyson, 2015). Through this lens, literature is valued not only for its artistic qualities but also for its capacity to engage with real-world issues and contribute to social awareness and transformation.

Strengths of Functionalism

One of the primary strengths of Functionalism in literary analysis is its ability to highlight the social, political, and historical contexts of literary works. By situating texts within the environments in which they were produced, Functionalist criticism allows scholars to understand literature as both a reflection and product of societal conditions. According to Eagleton (2008), this contextual approach helps uncover underlying ideologies, power relations, and cultural values embedded in literary texts, providing a richer and more nuanced interpretation than purely formalist readings. Through this lens, literature is not just an artistic creation but a historical document that illuminates the circumstances and struggles of the time.

Another significant strength of Functionalism is its emphasis on literature's role in addressing societal problems. Functionalist critics argue that literature has the capacity to critique social injustices, question established norms, and stimulate ethical reflection among readers (Wellek & Warren, 1977). By analyzing themes such as inequality, oppression, and moral dilemmas, scholars can demonstrate how literature engages with pressing social concerns. Swingewood (1972) notes that this perspective underscores literature's potential to raise awareness, provoke discussion, and inspire action, making it a powerful tool for societal insight and critique.

Functionalism encourages relevance and social responsibility in literary production. Authors and critics alike are urged to consider the societal implications of their works, fostering literature that resonates with contemporary issues and contributes to social consciousness. As Tyson (2015) emphasizes, this approach promotes a form of literary engagement that goes beyond aesthetic pleasure, advocating for the ethical and transformative potential of texts. By foregrounding literature's social function, Functionalism strengthens the connection between art and society, reinforcing the idea that literature should not exist in isolation but as a meaningful participant in human development and social progress.

Limitations of Functionalism

Despite its contributions, Functionalism has notable limitations as a framework for literary analysis. One major criticism is its tendency to reduce literature to propaganda or social commentary. By focusing heavily on the social, political, or moral functions of a text, functionalist criticism can overlook the complexity and multiplicity of meanings inherent in literature (Abrams, 1999). This reductionist approach

risks interpreting works solely in terms of ideological messages, ignoring subtler aspects such as irony, ambiguity, or character development that may not directly serve a social or political function.

Another limitation of Functionalism is its relative neglect of artistic form, style, and aesthetic pleasure. Literature is not only a vehicle for social engagement but also an artistic creation that derives meaning from language, narrative techniques, and stylistic innovation (Wellek & Warren, 1977). Functionalist approaches, by prioritizing the social purpose of texts, may fail to adequately appreciate the aesthetic qualities that give literature its emotional resonance and imaginative power. Critics argue that this oversight diminishes the richness of literary interpretation and undervalues the intrinsic beauty and craft of literature.

Functionalism carries the risk of over-politicizing literary interpretation. By emphasizing literature's engagement with societal issues, critics may impose contemporary political or moral concerns onto texts in ways that distort their original meanings (Eagleton, 2008). This overemphasis can lead to interpretations that are more reflective of the critic's agenda than of the text itself, potentially limiting the scope of analysis. As a result, while Functionalism offers valuable insights into literature's social relevance, it must be balanced with approaches that also recognize the formal, aesthetic, and imaginative dimensions of literary works.

Aestheticism as a Framework for Literary Analysis

Aestheticism is a literary and artistic movement that emerged in the late 19th century, emphasizing the primacy of beauty and sensory experience in artistic creation. Central to this framework is the belief that art should be appreciated for its own sake, independent of moral, political, or utilitarian considerations. This perspective challenges traditional views of literature as a tool for social instruction or moral guidance, proposing instead that the value of a literary work lies in its aesthetic qualities, its capacity to evoke emotion, delight the senses, and achieve formal perfection (Pater, 1873; Wilde, 1891). By prioritizing beauty and artistic experience, Aestheticism provides a lens through which literature can be analyzed in terms of its intrinsic artistic merits rather than extrinsic functions.

The core assumptions of Aestheticism are encapsulated in the dictum "art for art's sake" and the notion of artistic autonomy. The principle of "art for art's sake" asserts that the creation and evaluation of art should be guided solely by considerations of beauty and craftsmanship, free from external pressures such as moral didacticism or political ideology (Baldick, 2015). Artistic autonomy complements this idea, suggesting that the artist operates independently from societal norms, conventions, or expectations. These assumptions provide a theoretical foundation for literary criticism that privileges formal qualities, stylistic innovation, and imaginative expression over social commentary or ethical messaging.

Key proponents of Aestheticism, including Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, significantly influenced its development and application in literature. Walter Pater emphasized the pursuit of aesthetic experience as the ultimate goal of life and the literary work, advocating for a careful attention to detail, color, and form in art (Pater, 1873). Oscar Wilde, on the other hand, popularized the movement through both his critical essays and literary works, embodying the ideals of beauty, wit, and stylistic elegance (Wilde, 1891). Their contributions underscored the importance of the aesthetic experience and shaped a critical approach that privileges beauty, sensory appeal, and the artistry of language in literary evaluation.

Applying Aestheticism to literary texts involves a focus on elements such as beauty, form, style, and language. Critics adopting this framework analyze how authors construct their works to produce pleasurable aesthetic effects, often examining narrative technique, diction, imagery, rhythm, and structural composition (Eagleton, 2008). For instance, in Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray," an Aestheticist reading foregrounds the sumptuous descriptions, stylistic elegance, and thematic exploration of beauty and decay, rather than moral condemnation or social critique. By highlighting the artistry and sensory appeal of literature, Aestheticism encourages readers and scholars to appreciate texts as crafted objects of beauty, thereby enriching the interpretive possibilities of literary analysis.

Strengths of Aestheticism

One of the main strengths of Aestheticism lies in its preservation of the artistic and imaginative essence of literature. By emphasizing beauty and sensory experience over moral, political, or utilitarian functions, Aestheticism allows literature to be valued primarily as an art form. This perspective ensures that creative works are appreciated for their imaginative qualities, stylistic innovations, and the emotions they evoke, rather than judged solely according to societal norms or ethical expectations (Pater, 1873; Baldick, 2015). In doing so, Aestheticism safeguards the intrinsic artistic purpose of literature and encourages a deeper engagement with the creative imagination of writers.

Another notable strength of Aestheticism is its promotion of close reading and attention to literary form and technique. Because the movement prioritizes the aesthetic qualities of a text, critics and readers are encouraged to examine the nuances of language, structure, imagery, and rhythm. Such scrutiny fosters a more refined appreciation of the craft behind literature and cultivates an awareness of the subtle ways in which meaning and beauty are conveyed through artistic choices (Eagleton, 2008). This focus on technical and formal elements enriches literary analysis, allowing readers to discern the artistry inherent in even seemingly simple texts.

Aestheticism also protects literature from being constrained by moral, ideological, or didactic imperatives. By asserting that art exists independently of social or political concerns, the movement

shields literary works from external pressures to conform to prevailing ethical or ideological standards (Wilde, 1891). This autonomy empowers writers to explore controversial, unconventional, or experimental themes without fear of censorship or judgment, thereby expanding the scope of literary expression. Consequently, Aestheticism strengthens the creative freedom of literature while preserving its capacity to evoke aesthetic pleasure and imaginative reflection.

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Comparative Analysis of Functionalism and Aestheticism

Functionalism and Aestheticism, while both influential frameworks in literary criticism, differ fundamentally in their approaches but also share certain points of convergence. Both perspectives recognize the significance of literature in human experience, yet they diverge in focus and purpose. Functionalism emphasizes literature's social, moral, and political roles, interpreting texts as instruments

that reflect and shape society (Wellek & Warren, 1977). Aestheticism, in contrast, upholds the principle of “art for art’s sake,” prioritizing artistic form, beauty, and sensory experience over social utility (Gaut & Lopes, 2013). Despite these differences, both frameworks contribute to understanding literature’s impact: Functionalism examines its societal function, while Aestheticism highlights its capacity to evoke emotion and aesthetic appreciation.

A major point of divergence lies in the tension between social engagement and artistic autonomy. Functionalist criticism evaluates texts in terms of their societal relevance, ethical messages, and potential to critique or reform social structures (Eagleton, 2008). Aestheticism, conversely, insists on the autonomy of art, focusing on stylistic elements, form, and the intrinsic value of literary beauty, often disregarding moral or social imperatives (Abrams, 1999). This contrast shapes their applicability: Functionalism is particularly useful for analyzing socially committed literature, political narratives, and realist fiction, while Aestheticism is more effective in examining poetry, experimental fiction, and works that foreground artistic innovation.

In contemporary literary studies, both frameworks retain relevance, though their applicability depends on the critical goals of analysis. Functionalism remains vital for exploring literature’s engagement with social issues, cultural critique, and historical contexts, particularly in postcolonial studies, feminist literature, and socio-political narratives (Tyson, 2015). Aestheticism continues to inform formalist and stylistic studies, emphasizing the sensory and imaginative pleasures of literature. Integrating insights from both frameworks allows critics to balance the social, moral, and aesthetic dimensions of texts, fostering richer and more holistic interpretations that resonate with contemporary literary scholarship.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, analytical, and comparative research approach to critically assess Functionalism and Aestheticism as frameworks for literary analysis. The research primarily relies on literature review and textual analysis, drawing on scholarly books, journal articles, and critical essays that explore both theoretical perspectives and their application to literary texts. Selected literary works are examined through the lenses of Functionalism and Aestheticism to highlight how each framework interprets social, moral, and aesthetic dimensions. The study also employs a comparative method, identifying points of convergence and divergence between the two frameworks to evaluate their strengths, limitations, and overall effectiveness in literary criticism. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how integrating both perspectives can enhance literary interpretation.

Integrating Functionalism and Aestheticism for Holistic Literary Analysis

The paper position is that while both Functionalism and Aestheticism provide valuable insights for literary analysis, relying exclusively on either framework is insufficient for a comprehensive understanding of texts. Functionalism emphasizes the social, political, and moral dimensions of literature, viewing works as tools for societal reflection and change. Aestheticism, on the other hand, prioritizes artistic form, beauty, and autonomy, often detaching literature from its historical and social context. While each framework offers a distinct lens, neither fully captures the complexity of literature, which operates simultaneously as a social document and an artistic creation.

Exclusive reliance on Functionalism risks reducing literary texts to mere social commentary, overlooking the stylistic choices, linguistic creativity, and aesthetic experiences that define literature as art. Conversely, an approach grounded solely in Aestheticism may ignore the broader societal, cultural, and ethical implications of a work, resulting in criticism that is disconnected from lived realities. Such one-dimensional analyses fail to appreciate the multifaceted nature of literature, which often combines both aesthetic elegance and social significance.

A complementary or eclectic approach, integrating Functionalism and Aestheticism, allows critics to balance social relevance with artistic merit. For example, in analyzing Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, a functionalist lens highlights the societal disruptions caused by colonialism and internal cultural conflicts, while an aestheticist lens appreciates Achebe's narrative style, imagery, and symbolism. Similarly, Wole Soyinka's plays can be examined for their social commentary on political oppression (Functionalism) alongside the innovative use of language, dramatic structure, and poetic techniques (Aestheticism). Integrating both frameworks enriches interpretation by providing a more holistic understanding of literature as both an artistic and social phenomenon.

Implications for Literary Criticism and Scholarship

The debate between Functionalism and Aestheticism holds significant implications for modern literary criticism, as it underscores the ongoing tension between literature's social responsibilities and its artistic autonomy. Understanding this tension allows critics to appreciate that literary texts are not merely aesthetic objects nor solely instruments of social commentary but occupy a space where both dimensions interact. Engaging with both frameworks encourages a more nuanced critical approach, enabling scholars to examine texts for their stylistic sophistication while simultaneously exploring their social, political, and moral implications. This balanced perspective enriches contemporary literary discourse by fostering analyses that are both intellectually rigorous and contextually grounded.

In academic institutions, this debate has practical implications for teaching literature. Educators are challenged to move beyond a singular critical approach and to equip students with tools for multi-

dimensional analysis. By introducing students to both Functionalist and Aesthetic perspectives, instructors can cultivate critical thinking skills, enabling learners to assess not only what a text communicates about society but also how it conveys meaning through literary form and aesthetic innovation. Such an integrative teaching strategy prepares students to approach literature with flexibility, fostering analytical skills that are essential for both scholarly inquiry and creative practice.

The discussion is particularly relevant to African and postcolonial literary studies, where the intersection of social context and aesthetic expression is central. Many African literary works grapple with historical, political, and cultural issues while also showcasing distinctive narrative techniques, symbolism, and linguistic creativity. Applying a combined Functionalist-Aesthetic approach allows scholars to appreciate the socio-political commentary embedded in these works while also valuing their artistic contributions. This dual focus ensures that African and postcolonial literature is studied not only for its engagement with social realities but also for its innovation, resilience, and aesthetic achievements.

Finally, this debate contributes to broader discussions on the purpose of literature. By engaging with both Functionalist and Aesthetic perspectives, literary scholarship recognizes that literature can simultaneously inform, critique, and inspire. Literature is not limited to moral instruction or entertainment; it is a vehicle for understanding human experience, shaping societal consciousness, and cultivating aesthetic sensibilities. Integrating these frameworks affirms literature's dual function as a mirror to society and a medium of artistic expression, reinforcing its enduring relevance in scholarship, pedagogy, and cultural discourse.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper has critically examined Functionalism and Aestheticism as frameworks for literary analysis, highlighting their respective strengths and limitations. Functionalism emphasizes the social, political, and moral dimensions of literature, demonstrating how texts can reflect and influence society, while Aestheticism foregrounds artistic form, beauty, and creative autonomy. Both frameworks provide valuable insights, yet each is limited when applied in isolation. Functionalism may overlook aesthetic qualities, whereas Aestheticism may ignore social and cultural contexts. A comparative and integrative approach, therefore, offers a more holistic method for interpreting literary works, balancing both social relevance and artistic excellence.

Reaffirming the author's position, this study argues that neither Functionalism nor Aestheticism alone is sufficient for comprehensive literary analysis. An eclectic approach, which combines the analytical strengths of both frameworks, enables critics to explore literature as both an art form and a social document. By applying this combined lens, scholars can appreciate the technical craftsmanship of a work

while also engaging with its societal, historical, and moral dimensions, resulting in richer and more meaningful interpretations.

Finally, the discussion of these frameworks has broader implications for the future of literary analysis and theory. As literature continues to evolve in response to changing social, cultural, and technological contexts, critical approaches must remain flexible, integrative, and adaptive. The future of literary scholarship lies in the willingness to move beyond rigid theoretical boundaries, embracing frameworks that acknowledge both the aesthetic and functional dimensions of texts. Such an approach ensures that literature retains its relevance as a vehicle for intellectual, social, and artistic exploration.

Article History

Received: 08-July-2024

Accepted: 18-July-2024

Published: 28-July-2024

Revised: 20-Jan-2026

Article Publication Details (*rpt**)

This article is published in the [International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Bulletin](#), ISSN 3108-1428 (Online). In Volume 3 Issue 4 (July – Aug) 2024

The journal is published and managed by [IRPG](#).

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Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank the editors and the reviewers for their valuable suggestions on this paper.

Funding

The authors declare that no funding was received for this work.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The author(s) declare that it is not applicable.

Consent for publication

The author(s) declare that this is not applicable.

Competing interests

The author(s) declare that they have no competing interests.

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