

## ARMENIAN VOICES IN TURKISH BESTSELLERS: CASE STUDY OF AHMET ÜMİT'S NOVEL “FAREWELL, MY BEAUTIFUL HOMELAND”

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### Abstract

Over the past thirty years, the dissolution of boundaries between high literature and mass-market fiction has given rise to a unique “middle-class” prose in Türkiye. Detective writer and journalist Ahmet Ümit is widely regarded as one of the leading figures of this literary trend. This article examines how the Armenian theme is reflected in one of A. Ümit's most popular detective novels “Farewell, My Beautiful Homeland” (2015). In the novel, author portrays the formation, development, and eventual decline of the Young Turks Movement within the broader context of early 20th-century Ottoman life, seeking to understand the causes of the Empire's collapse. Among the many issues A. Ümit addresses are the Armenian Genocide and mass deportations, presented, however, not in his own voice, but through the words of one of the characters of the novel – Arshak Boghossyan.

**Keywords:** *Modern Fiction, Turkish Prose, Ahmet Ümit, Young Turks, Continuity, Armenians in Türkiye, Armenian Genocide.*

### “Oppositional” detective writer in Erdoğan's Türkiye: Ahmet Ümit

In Türkiye, a distinctive “middle-class” prose has emerged over the past two-three decades, shaped by the dissolution of boundaries between high literature and mass-market bestseller fiction, and by the decrease in their polarization. While falling short of the standards of high literature in terms of artistry, these novels serve as effective instruments for disseminating the ideological approaches of both the government and the opposition to broad layers of society. These books typically sell millions of copies and sometimes raise unexpected themes and historical events that have long been considered taboo in Türkiye. Ahmet Ümit is regarded as one of the

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most prominent figures of abovementioned “middle-class literature.” Born in 1960 in the city Gaziantep, Ahmet Ümit was actively involved in left-wing activities, first in his hometown and later in Istanbul. In the late 1980s, as a representative of the Turkish leftist movement, he spent more than 5 years in Moscow. A. Ümit’s literary career began in 1996 with the novel “*The Fog and the Night*”<sup>1</sup>. His works have since been translated into 23 languages, including Armenian<sup>2</sup>.

The peculiarity of his novels, primarily written in the detective genre, lies in their historical references to civilizations and peoples who once inhabited the territory of present-day Türkiye, including the Hittites, Romans, Armenians, and Greeks. Moreover, not only does Ümit present the inseparability of the connection between the present and the past but unlike the writers sponsored by the Erdoğan regime, he, as emphasised by the Russian literary critic Maria Repenkova, seeks to offer an alternative reading of Türkiye's history, countering the tendency of writers like İskender Pala, Nazan Bekiroğlu and Nuriye Akman to select, interpret and mythologise history in a biased manner<sup>3</sup>.

Ahmet Ümit’s literary approaches are deeply connected to his critical stance against Erdoğan’s regime that he openly declares in his interviews. Speaking to "Independent Türkçe" back in 2019, A. Ümit stated that when the Justice and Development Party came to power, it was a project of the opponents of the ideology of the republic, a movement that united society, a moderate Islamic-democratic movement, but over time it transformed into a totalitarian structure: “In seventeen years, there has been no serious achievement, no success. There is destruction everywhere. That is why something new is about to begin. Former members of the AKP have started to establish new parties. Moreover, the AKP lost power in major cities like Istanbul and Ankara. This is the messenger of change”<sup>4</sup>. In another interview, comparing the situation in Türkiye after the coup of September

<sup>1</sup> Find more details about Ahmet Ümit's biography on the writer's official website <https://www.ahmetumit.com/biyografi.php> (accessed 15.09.2025).

<sup>2</sup> Umit, Ahmet, Stambuli hushē [Ümit Ahmet, A Memento for Istanbul], Yerevan, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Repenkova Maria, Istoricheskiy roman Ahmeta Umita – ètap v razvitiy sovremennoy tureckoj belletristiki, Filologicheskie nauki. Voprosy teorii i praktiki [ Repenkova Maria Ahmet Ümit's historical novel – a stage in the development of contemporary Turkish fiction, Philological Sciences. Questions of Theory and Practice], Gramota, 9(87), p. 2, Tambov, pp. 290-297, [https://www.gramota.net/articles/issn\\_1997-2911\\_2018\\_9-2\\_17.pdf](https://www.gramota.net/articles/issn_1997-2911_2018_9-2_17.pdf) (accessed 16.07.2025).

<sup>4</sup>Ahmet Ümit Independent Türkçe'ye konuştu: Cumhuriyet kuruldu ama kul kültürü yoklmadı <https://www.indyturk.com/node/107056/r%C3%86portaj/ahmet-%C3%BCmit-independent-%C3%BCrk%C3%A7e%280%99ye-konu%C5%9Ftu-cumhuriyet-kuruldu-ama-kul-k%C3%BClt%C3%BC%C3%BCr%C3%BC%C3%BC> (accessed 17.07.2025)

12, 1980, with the modernity, the author noted that Turkish society was witnessing manifestations of fascism from one party. He mentioned, "Perhaps, unlike in the old days, there are no tortures in prisons, people are not killed in prisons, but there are still, for example, certain suspicious deaths. On the other hand, when the army was staging a coup, there was no fear of division because the army belonged to everyone, but in the case of the current party fascism, the risk of internal division is high. on many issues, we are already divided"<sup>5</sup>. Highly criticizing Türkiye's current political situation Ahmet Ümit puts forward the metaphor of "killing the father": "We perceive state officials as fathers. In the Ottoman times, the father was the sultan. Then Atatürk came, and we had a father again. İsmet İnönü, Adnan Menderes, Süleyman Demirel who was directly nicknamed as "**baba** [father in Turkish- N. P.]", and now Tayyip Erdoğan... [In my novels] killing the father means settling accounts with the past, looking towards the future. We have never done anything like this before, neither in real life nor in literature"<sup>6</sup>. Ahmet Ümit links the constant search for "a father or supporter/protector" with the "slavery mindset" of the whole Turkish society. Reflecting on Türkiye's historical path, A. Ümit noted: "The French Revolution came from below. Our society does not have such a desire. Here, intellectuals want to stage a coup in the name of the people. This means that perhaps the people are hopeless, but they do not go and say, 'Enough, brother, let's rise against the padişah'. One thing that does not change in these lands is the culture of slavery"<sup>7</sup>. In this context, examining the continuity between Ottoman Empire and Republican Türkiye, Ahmet Ümit views the Kemalist movement not as an isolated, distinct phenomenon, but as a product of the Abdul Hamid II's and the Young Turks' policies. In an interview with the "Cumhuriyet" newspaper, Ahmet Ümit stated: " Ultimately, the reason for the establishment of the current republic was the Committee of Union and Progress. This is a very important observation. Mustafa Kemal, Ismet İnönü, Celal Bayar: all of the figures who played a part in proclamation of the republic were Ittihadists. For many decades, it is always said that the first parliament was established on April 23, 1920. No, the first, albeit short-lived parliament, opened in 1876. And for the second time parliament was opened on July 23, 1908. Therefore, the

<sup>5</sup> Yazar Ahmet Ümit: Bazen sansürlüyorum, [https://www.istanbulgercegi.com/yazar-ahmet-umit-bazen-sansurluyorum\\_114565.html](https://www.istanbulgercegi.com/yazar-ahmet-umit-bazen-sansurluyorum_114565.html) (accessed 17.07.2025)

<sup>6</sup> Ahmet Ümit: "Toplum olarak babayı öldürecek olgunluğa henüz gelmedik", <https://egoistokur.com/freuddan-fatih-sultan-mehmede-psikanaliz/> (accessed 17.07.2025)

<sup>7</sup> "Bu kitabı yazdığını için çok mutluyum" <https://i24.com.tr/k24/yazi/ahmet-umit,493> (accessed 17.07.2025)

republic was established on the basis of the collectivity coming from those times, it did not arise suddenly... in reality...Mustafa Kemal is also one who comes from Union and Progress<sup>8</sup>, received his education there, and shaped his political orientation there"<sup>9</sup>. In his novel "Farewell, my beautiful homeland" (2015)<sup>10</sup>

Ahmet Ümit depicts a comprehensive picture of the Young Turk movement's origins, development, initial victories, and the decisions that ultimately led to the empire's collapse after World War I, while also revealing the behind-the-scenes activities of several Young Turk figures during the early years of the republic.

### **"Farewell, my beautiful homeland": A Detective Chronicle from Empire to Republic**

As we have already mentioned, Ahmet Ümit's detectives often connect modern and historical periods, shedding light on the various civilizations that once inhabited the territories of modern Türkiye. From this point of view, "Farewell, my beautiful homeland" stands apart as it portrays the last two decades of the Ottoman Empire and has no connections to the present day.<sup>11</sup> The novel summarizes the findings of three years of historical research and fieldwork carried out in Thessaloniki and Paris. The narrative

<sup>8</sup> To better understand the ideological continuity between the Ittihadists and the Kemalists, and the consistency of the ruling elite's policies beneath the guise of radical change from the empire's fall to the mid-20th century one can look to memoirs written by a founding member of the Union and Progress Committee and later in the republican period a deputy in the Turkish Grand National Assembly Midhat Şükrü Bleda (1874–1956). In the book entitled "The Collapse of the Empire" Bleda writes that once he travels to Bursa to treat his rheumatism. In the garden of the Gönlü Ferat hotel, a young man approaches him and introduces himself as Mahmud Celal, a member of the [Union and Progress] Committee's Bursa branch. Impressed by their conversation, Bleda, upon returning to Istanbul, intervened to have him appointed chief secretary in Izmir. As the narrative later reveals, this young man was none other than Celal Bayar, the third president of the Republic of Turkey and earlier prime minister during Ataturk's time. It is noteworthy that Bayar considered himself a student of Bleda. Midhat Şükrü recalled: "When Atatürk appointed him prime minister, I was the deputy of Sivas. After his speech presenting the government's first program to the Assembly, he came down, approached me, and whispered in my ear, 'Are you satisfied with your student?'" Bleda, Midhat Şükrü, İmparatorluğun çöküşü, İstanbul, 1973, s.54-56.

<sup>9</sup> "İtihat ve Terakki'nin fotoğrafını çekmek istedim", 04.12.2015 <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/itihat-ve-terakkinin-fotografini-cekmek-istedim-442317> (accessed 16.07.2025)

<sup>10</sup> Ümit Ahmet, Elveda güzel vatanım, İstanbul, 2015. The novel is dedicated to the memory of the victims of the two explosions that occurred on October 10, 2015 during a peaceful demonstration of civil society organizations in Ankara.

<sup>11</sup> Hepimiz aynı yerdeyiz Türkiye yoksa biz de yokuz!, <https://www.sabah.com.tr/magazin/2018/07/09/ahmet-umit-hepimiz-ayni-yerdeyiz-turkiye-yoksa-biz-de-yokuz?paging=3> (accessed 19.08.2025)

unfolds in 1926, after the assassination attempt on Mustafa Kemal in Izmir.<sup>12</sup> In its aftermath, former Ittihadist members face persecution, and a prominent figure, Şehsuvar Sami hides in Istanbul's Pera Palace Hotel and decides to write letters to his beloved Esther who lives in Paris. In these letters which he never sent to Esther, Şehsuvar gradually reveals the true intentions and motivations of those who had followed him from the beginning of the story, while also presenting the last twenty years of Ottoman-Turkish history. As a participant and eyewitness to the dramatic historical events of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Şehsuvar attempts to evaluate his own life within their context, framing it through the chain of "patriotism—love—duty—treason." As the Russian Turkologist Larisa Sofronova rightly emphasizes, "although the novel is historical, its central theme is not tied to historical events but to the problem of personal moral choice."<sup>13</sup> Using Şehsuvar's letters, the author seeks the initial conditions for the Young Turk movement's success in the failures of Abdulhamid's government. At the same time, by portraying both the human and political dimensions of the Young Turk leaders, he highlights the errors that ultimately led to the state's downfall. Şehsuvar presents a positive portrayal of his immediate superior, Taleat: "I have never doubted Taleat's sincerity and faith". At the same time, he asks Esther a rhetorical question: "In your opinion, are sincerity and faith enough to govern a country?"<sup>14</sup> Enver emerges as the most negatively drawn figure among the Young Turks. Even after the disastrous defeat at Sarıkamış, his influence was so big that cargo arriving from Germany to the Ottoman Empire bore the label "Enverland."<sup>15</sup> To his associates, he seemed more a dreamer than a realist. With humor, Ümit recounts his marriage to Naciye Sultan through the voice of Taleat Pasha: "Our Enver is a strange man; he fell in love with Naciye Sultan, whom he has never seen, knowing her only from his mother's description. As in politics, in matters of love he continues to pursue not reality, but dreams."<sup>16</sup> Şehsuvar's letters also address the question of whether the Young Turk

<sup>12</sup> On June 14, 1926, a group of former ministers, deputies, and governors planned an assassination attempt against Atatürk in the Kemerköy district of Izmir. While in Balıkesir, Mustafa Kemal received a telegram revealing the plot. As a result, several former high-ranking officials, including Dr. Nazim, were arrested and subsequently executed. For more details see Müezzinoğlu E., İzmir Suikasti ve Ahmet Şükrü Bey, International Journal of Social Science, 2015, N: 38, p. 155-176.

<sup>13</sup> Sofronova Larisa, O romane Ahmeta Ümita «Proshhaj, moja prekrasnaja rodina» [About the novel "Farewell, my beautiful homeland by Ahmet Ümit"], Vostochnyj al'manah, obshh. red. T. A. Zakaurov. Moskva, 2017. s. 157-169.

<sup>14</sup> Elveda güzel vatanım, s. 396

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 417

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 411

regime's decision to enter World War I, ultimately fatal to the Ottoman Empire, was right or wrong. Notably, according to the narrative, Taleat at first resisted the war, but abandoned by Britain, France, and Russia, was driven into alliance with Germany<sup>17</sup>. Şehsuvar writes to Esther: "Entering the war was like a card game, and the chances of winning were very slim."<sup>18</sup> Yet the letters also show how each leader had his own motives: for Enver, the war was an opportunity to realize Pan-Turkist ideas, while Cemal Pasha justified Türkiye's entry by saying, "We entered the war so that we could pay wages. The treasury was completely empty; we had no money to buy bread for the army. The Germans, who knew our situation better than us, offered an alliance, and we agreed."<sup>19</sup> Summarizing the history of the Young Turk leaders, Şehsuvar Şehsuvar reflects on the Young Turk leaders: "They betrayed both their ideals and their history. Therefore, neither the people nor history will forgive them."<sup>20</sup> Şehsuvar considers Abdulhamid's death and Taleat's departure from Türkiye in 1918 to mark the end of an era, while emphasizing that the ideas of Taleat, Enver, and Cemal endured within the republic. In his letters he reflects: "The revolution was carried out in 1908. That parliament, as you very well know, was established not on April 23, 1920, but on December 17, 1908. Yet no one wants to remember that. Everyone acts as if the struggle for country's freedom began in 1919. The 30-year fight against the heartless oppression of dictatorship, those who died for it, those who rotted in prisons and exile seem to have been forgotten. And yet, the roots of the liberation struggle lie there."<sup>21</sup>

Ahmed Ümit's reflections, voiced through his hero Şehsuvar on the complex and ambiguous period of Ottoman history, were naturally not unequivocally accepted by Turkish literary scholars and critics. In his review, Sevim Kahraman accuses Ahmet Ümit of diminishing the role of the Ittihadist revolution, branding the novel regressive and of poor quality.<sup>22</sup> A. Sadık Albayrak echoes this opinion, harshly criticizing both novel's artistic value and historical accuracy, and dismissing it as a choice for

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 415

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 416

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 470

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 449

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 83

<sup>22</sup> Kahraman S., Elveda Edebiyat, Elveda Devrim –I <http://www.yenidenatilim.com/elveda-edebiyat-elveda-devrim-i-sevim-kahraman/1675/> (accessed 17.07.2025), the second part of it - Kahraman S. Elveda Edebiyat, Elveda Devrim – II <http://www.abcgazetesi.com/arsiv/elvedaedaebiyat-elveda-devrim-ii/haber-18501> (accessed 17.07.2025)

readers without historical awareness or aesthetic sensibility.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, Professor Mustafa Gençeri finds the novel interesting and useful for contemporary readers, arguing that it allows one to reimagine the cultural landscape of the Ottoman and early Turkish Republic while addressing themes neglected for decades.<sup>24</sup> Finally, A. Yackley observes that the novel's depiction of rising authoritarianism and restrictions on free expression runs like a red thread—highly relevant to today's Türkiye.<sup>25</sup>

### **“Forgotten” heroes of the Era: Armenian Genocide in the “Farewell, my beautiful homeland”**

Depicting Türkiye's external and internal problems in the context of the First World War Ahmet Ümit, with his leftist liberal views, does not shy away from addressing the issue of the Armenian Genocide—long treated as taboo by state propaganda.

Since the early 1990s, sweeping changes in Türkiye, the region, and the wider world have inevitably left their mark on literature and affected thematic choices of the Turkish authors. Armenia's independence, the growing international recognition of the Genocide, the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi AKP in Turkish) government's “Zero Problems with Neighbors” policy and later “Armenian Reform” initiatives after 2002, and—last but not least—the rapid acceleration of information flows that made taboos harder to sustain were among the main factors bringing Armenian subject into Turkish fiction in the last decade of the XX century and early XXI century.

In earlier phases, authors' approaches were largely uniform due to the constraints of their time. Today, however, we encounter a wide range of interpretations of the theme. Many works still deny the reality of the Genocide, portraying Armenians as murderers and embodiments of cruelty.<sup>26</sup> In such novels, Turks appear as innocent victims and sufferers, while Armenians are depicted as cruel, evil, and aggressive. Moreover,

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<sup>23</sup> Albayrak B. S., Ahmet Ümit'in Gecikmiş Elveda'sı-2 <https://ilerihaber.org/yazar/ahmet-umitin-gecikmis-elvedasi-2-55802.html>, Part 1 Albayrak B. S. Ahmet Ümit'in Gecikmiş Elveda'sı-2, <http://ilerihaber.org/yazar/ahmetumitin-gecikmis-elvedasi-1-55537.html> (accessed 18.05.2025)

<sup>24</sup> See the full review Gençer M. Elveda Güzel Vatanım: Devletin derinlikleri, toprağın derinliklerinden daha karanlıktır // Tarih Kritik. 2017. № 3 (1). S. 131-146. <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/266961> (accessed 17.07.2024)

<sup>25</sup> Yackley A. J., In historical fiction, top-selling Turkish writer offers modern critique", <http://www.reuters.com/article/usturkey-writer-idUSKCN0X41UX> (accessed 17.07.2024)

<sup>26</sup> See for example Uzunyaylı Taleat, Paylaşımayan Topraklar, İstanbul, 2015; Gündüz Tufan, Nisanın iki günü, İstanbul, 2015; Eyüp Altun, Sona, İstanbul, 2015.

admissions of Armenian cruelty are often voiced by Armenian characters themselves, a technique meant to lend credibility to the narrative.

Meanwhile, the number of authors who create relatively realistic depictions of the genocide and adopt an empathetic or at least neutral attitude toward Armenians is increasing.<sup>27</sup> Notably, when addressing the genocide, Turkish writers tend to avoid speaking in their own voice as narrators, instead presenting the theme through the words of their characters. They also refrain from explicit evaluations or commentary, leaving readers to draw their own conclusions from the episodes depicted. Ahmet Ümit is among this group of authors. In *Farewell, My Beautiful Homeland*, the Armenian theme is explored through the meeting of the main character Şehsuvar with his classmate Arshak Poghosyan, who, according to the plot, has returned to Istanbul from Paris in 1926.

Originally from Sebastia (Sivas), Arshak is described by Şehsuvar as lazy yet intelligent and kind. His family's vast estates gave him access to luxuries far beyond Şehsuvar's means. This detail underscores the economic motives behind the Genocide. Like countless Armenians, Arshak's family was driven from their homeland in Sebastia and ultimately perished. Interestingly, when quoting Arshak's words in his letter to Esther, Şehsuvar offers brief explanations about the events of 1915, noting that the decision to exile Armenians was taken on the advice of the German General Staff following the defeat at Sarıkamış. He wrote to Esther that, although he knew of the massacre of tens of thousands of Armenians, he pretended ignorance and asked: "How, how did this misfortune happen?" The letter continues with Arshak's words: "A look of disbelief appeared on his face, saying, 'As if you don't know that they died during the deportation from Sivas to Lebanon.' When Şehsuvar insists that he would have tried to help had he known, Arshak replies: 'Whom would you save, Şehsuvar? We were a family of two hundred... No, Şehsuvar, you couldn't save anyone.' Ironically, Arshak survived because he had volunteered for service in the Dardanelles. Şehsuvar quotes his friend's words: "...I was worried that I hadn't received a letter since April, but I thought—it's war, I was worried that my family would think I was dead, while my family had died. Everyone, Şehsuvar, everyone—from my grandfather Apik to my youngest cousin Vache. I couldn't find anyone, neither them nor their graves. Yes, I found out after being demobilized, I returned home to Sivas. Have you ever seen a village where there are no people at all? Have you ever heard the

<sup>27</sup> See for example Korat Gürçel, *Unutkan ayna*, İstanbul, 2019; Aydın Seyfullah, *Gri zaman*, İstanbul, 2017. Kutlu Ayla, *Bir göçmen kuştu O*, İstanbul, 2008.

deafening silence? Have you ever witnessed how the sweetest memories of childhood turn into nightmare? I have experienced all of that, Şehsuvar. Why, I ask myself, why was my family killed? You might say that it was wartime conditions, that some Armenian rebels collaborated with the Russians. I know that our people, like the Greeks and Bulgarians, wanted to create their own state. I know that the Ottoman Empire wanted to secure itself, but was it necessary for so many people to die? Was it necessary to take so many lives, shed so much blood, inflict so much pain, so much persecution, injustice, suffering? These lands are cursed, Şehsuvar, as if they were watered not with water, but with blood. as if not the sun, but a wild light illuminates our days. as if not milk from the breasts of our mothers, but anger, so merciless, so harsh, so pitiless, came to us. "I cannot explain these massacres, this ruthlessness, this cruelty in any other way."<sup>28</sup> Arshak also notes that he found the place of his relatives' murder in Malatya, in a place called Çelebi: "It turns out that they killed my relatives. They gathered the men, took them to the top of the mountains, attacked them with knives, axes, hatchets, everything, threw their bodies off the mountain so that they would become food for wolves and birds. I found no trace of our people, Şehsuvar."<sup>29</sup>

After presenting Arshak's story, however, the author shifts focus away from the Genocide, turning instead to detailed descriptions of other events.

## Conclusion

The early 21st century was marked by the rise of Turkish "middle-class fiction", whose representatives became widely known both inside and outside the country. One of the most prominent modern Turkish authors, Ahmet Ümit, addresses some of the most difficult problems of contemporary Turkish society, often criticizing the policies and decisions of the ruling authorities. Following the trend of discussing themes that had been taboo for many decades, Ümit speaks about the Armenian Genocide in one of his most notable historical detective novels, *Farewell, My Beautiful Homeland*. In this book, the Armenian Genocide appears among several non-central, peripheral issues. Although the theme is discussed in fewer than ten pages, within a single dialogue between two characters Şehsuvar Sami and his classmate from Sivas, Arshak Boghossian, Ümit manages to reflect on its key dimensions. In this relatively short passage, readers find hints about the prosperous financial situation of Armenians before the war

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 461-466

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

and the inevitable envy of Turks toward them. Through the thoughts of Şahsuvar, it becomes clear that despite their wealth, Armenians were not treated as equal citizens in the Ottoman Empire. The dialogue also reveals the deportations, violence, and murders of entire families. Despite depicting these scenes, Ümit as narrator refrains from expressing any direct opinion or commentary, leaving readers to reflect on the Armenian Genocide and draw their own conclusions.

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**Conflict of Interests**

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

**Ethical Standards**

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.