
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

**Fragments of the Intellectual Self Cultural Memory, Time, and Identity in Ali Oumlil's
*Mirrors of Memory: Narrative***

Omar ID MOULID

*Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.), Faculté des Langues, des Arts et des Sciences Humaines Pôle Universitaire Ait Melloul,
Université Ibn Zohr Agadir- Morocco*

Corresponding Author: Omar ID MOULID, **E-mail:** Omar.idmoulid@edu.uiz.ac.ma

| ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between selfhood, cultural memory, and historical consciousness in Ali Oumlil's *Marāyā al-Dhākira: Sard (Mirrors of Memory: A Narrative, 2016)*. Rather than treating the work as a conventional autobiography organized around a coherent life trajectory, the article reads it as an intellectual narrative in which personal recollection intersects with Morocco's cultural and historical transformations. It proposes the concept of the fragmented intellectual self to highlight the form of subjectivity that springs up from Oumlil's movement between inherited traditions and modern intellectual formations, individual experience and collective history, and continuity and historical rupture. Drawing primarily on cultural memory studies and theories of autobiographical selfhood, the article argues that fragmentation does not signify the dissolution of identity. It becomes instead a productive intellectual condition through which the autobiographical subject questions inherited certainties and reconstructs its relationship with history. Time and memory consequently acquire political as well as existential significance. Memory links the individual to collective experience, but it also permits critical distance from dominant narratives of identity, authenticity, and tradition. Oumlil's *Mirrors of Memory: A Narrative* transforms autobiography into a form of cultural critique in which remembrance serves the reconstruction of the self and the reimagining of Morocco's cultural and intellectual future.

| KEYWORDS

Cultural memory; autobiography; fragmented self; intellectual identity

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: September 15, 2026 **PUBLISHED:** October 21, 2026 **DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.61424/ijah.v4i4.1079>

1. Introduction

Autobiography does more than recover a life from the past. It selects, orders, interprets, and gives narrative form to experiences whose significance changes as the autobiographical subject moves through time. The self that appears in autobiography is therefore neither identical to the self that originally lived the events nor entirely independent from it. Memory mediates between these temporal positions and provides the narrative resources through which the past becomes intelligible in the present. In this regard, Nicola King defines remembered identity as provisional rather than as the recovery of an original and stable self (King 2000, 17). This conception proves particularly useful for reading Ali Oumlil's *Marāyā al-Dhākira: Sard (Mirrors of Memory: A Narrative)*¹, a text in which personal recollection constantly opens onto wider questions of culture, history, modernity, religion, intellectual responsibility, and political life.

Oumlil occupies an important position in contemporary Moroccan intellectual thought. His work addresses the relationship between Arab-Islamic intellectual traditions and modern political and philosophical concepts, with particular attention to democracy, difference, state formation, cultural authority, and the role of intellectuals. Oumlil's narrative, however, approaches many of these concerns through another mode. Rather than constructing a systematic philosophical argument, Oumlil returns to episodes, places, impressions, deaths, encounters, historical figures, cultural practices, and intellectual questions that have remained within his memory. The text consequently moves between autobiography, philosophical reflection, historical commentary, and cultural criticism.

The narrative itself resists the expectations of conventional autobiography. It does not offer a stable chronological progression from childhood to maturity, nor does it organize the author's life around a unified developmental plot. Memory interrupts chronology. One reflection leads to another; a personal episode may open onto a meditation on death, colonialism, religion, modernity, or the historical destiny of societies. The result is an autobiographical subject whose coherence lies less in chronological continuity than in the intellectual relationships that memory establishes among otherwise dispersed experiences.

This article describes that subject as the fragmented intellectual self. Fragmentation here does not refer simply to psychological instability or the failure to construct a coherent identity. It identifies an intellectual condition produced through exposure to heterogeneous cultural traditions, historical ruptures, conflicting forms of knowledge, and changing social worlds. Oumlil himself formulates the problem when he asks whether someone whose mind has been filled with fragmented ideas can ever "collect the fragments of his self" (Oumlil 2016, 152–53). The question connects intellectual fragmentation directly to autobiographical selfhood. Ideas acquired "from both the old and the new" cease to form an orderly intellectual inheritance. They instead produce a self that must continually reconsider the terms of its own coherence.

The article argues that this fragmentation becomes productive because memory converts discontinuity into reflection. Oumlil does not resolve the contradictions between tradition and modernity, individual and collective identity, past and present, or local and global forms of knowledge by choosing one side over another. His autobiographical narrative keeps these tensions open. Memory provides the space in which they can be confronted, compared, criticized, and reinterpreted.

The discussion draws on cultural memory studies, particularly Astrid Erll's understanding of memory as a culturally mediated process, together with work on autobiographical identity by Nicola King, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, Jan Assmann, and Paul Ricoeur. Close textual analysis provides the primary method. Particular attention falls on moments in which Oumlil connects personal experience with historical time, cultural inheritance, mortality, intellectual difference, and collective memory.

2. Autobiography, Memory, and the Problem of a Coherent Self

The opening problem of *Mirrors of Memory: A Narrative* concerns the location of the self within time. Oumlil states: "I was born in this era, unaware of the wisdom of not being born in another era" (2016, 17). The statement appears deceptively simple, yet it places historical contingency at the center of selfhood. One does not choose the period into which one is born, but that period supplies many of the political, cultural, and intellectual categories through which the self later understands its existence.

This idea challenges conceptions of identity based on an original essence waiting to be recovered through memory. King argues that autobiographical memory reconstructs rather than simply retrieves identity. Remembering the self therefore involves a provisional act that places past and present versions of the subject into a changing relationship (2000, 17). Oumlil's narrative follows precisely this model. His autobiographical self becomes intelligible through retrospective interpretation rather than through the recovery of a single foundational identity.

The historical circumstances that surround Oumlil's intellectual life intensify this process. His generation inherited the effects of colonial domination while participating in societies faced with decolonization,

nationalism, state formation, ideological conflict, and rapidly expanding global intellectual exchange. The result is a self whose intellectual register cannot derive exclusively from one cultural genealogy. Classical Arab-Islamic thought, Moroccan cultural experience, modern political philosophy, colonial history, secular intellectual traditions, and global debates coexist within the same consciousness.

Such coexistence produces tension. Oumlil describes a mind in which ideas repeatedly form a thread and then disperse. He associates this condition with colonial expansion and the subsequent acceleration of communication, which introduced unprecedented flows of ideas into societies whose intellectual structures had previously developed through more limited forms of exchange (2016, 152–53). Fragmentation is therefore not presented merely as an individual predicament. It belongs to a broader historical transformation of intellectual life.

The autobiographical self becomes an especially revealing site for this conflict because it possesses neither complete autonomy from culture nor complete submission to it. Smith and Watson emphasize the relational nature of autobiographical subjectivity: self-knowledge depends upon relationships with other people, social structures, cultural narratives, and remembered experiences (2010, 64). Oumlil's self similarly emerges through encounters with individuals, cities, religious beliefs, political institutions, inherited narratives, books, memories, and historical transformations.

The fragmented intellectual self should therefore not be understood as a failed unified self. Its fragmentation reflects the plurality of the cultural and intellectual worlds that constitute it. In this respect, Oumlil's autobiographical project approaches Abdelkebir Khatibi's critique of intellectual dependence on singular epistemological centers. Khatibi's demand for a thought capable of interrogating both inherited local structures and imported systems of knowledge provides an important parallel to Oumlil's refusal of simple intellectual binaries (Khatibi 2019). Both perspectives make critical distance indispensable to intellectual autonomy.

Oumlil's text thus converts fragmentation into a method of self-questioning. The fragmented subject cannot retreat comfortably into claims of pure authenticity because its own intellectual formation reveals the historical constructedness of such claims. Neither can it accept modernity as an uncontested external model. Its position between different intellectual traditions requires criticism in more than one direction.

3. Time, Rupture, and the Formation of the Intellectual Self

Time has a central place in this process because fragmentation emerges through historical discontinuity. Oumlil writes that "history is a memory that resists forgetting" (2016, 111). The statement links history and memory without making them identical. History gives temporal form to collective experience, while memory preserves, selects, and reinterprets what remains significant from that experience.

Ricoeur's account of narrative temporality helps clarify this relationship. Narrative does not merely place events on a chronological line. It organizes temporal experience and creates connections among past, present, and anticipated futures (Ricoeur 1984). Autobiography therefore transforms time into an interpretive structure. Experiences separated by decades can become adjacent in memory because the autobiographical subject recognizes a relationship between them.

Oumlil exploits this temporal freedom throughout *Mirrors of Memory: A narrative*. His narrative moves across periods and geographical spaces rather than following strict chronology. Morocco, Beirut, Andalusia, Paris, China, and other places enter a mnemonic geography in which spatial movement corresponds to intellectual and historical movement. The narrative structure consequently reproduces the condition it describes: a consciousness composed of temporal and cultural fragments.

Oumlil's reflection on Western historical consciousness offers a revealing example. He notes that modern Western societies increasingly oriented time toward the future and transformed the past into an object of preservation, exhibition, and historical contemplation. Museums thus became signs of a culture capable of distancing itself from its own past while representing other societies as objects of historical display (Oumlil 2016, 68–69). The observation connects temporal consciousness to relations of power. To define another culture

as belonging to the past is also to establish a hierarchy of historical time.

For Oumlil, time therefore has political significance. His aphoristic declaration that “he who rules imposes his conception of time” (2016, 71) expresses this relationship with particular force. Political authority does not govern only institutions and bodies; it also influences narratives of progress, decline, origin, continuity, and destiny. Competing visions of society often correspond to competing temporal orientations.

This explains Oumlil’s persistent distinction between a future-oriented critical consciousness and forms of thought that seek certainty through an idealized past. Yet his criticism does not imply that modernity requires the destruction of memory. On the contrary, a society without memory would lack the historical resources necessary for critical self-understanding. The problem lies not in remembering the past but in converting memory into an unquestionable authority.

The intellectual self must therefore negotiate both continuity and rupture. It inherits cultural forms without remaining imprisoned within them. It participates in modernity without treating modernity as a culturally neutral or universally completed model. This double movement gives fragmentation its productive force. The discontinuities within Oumlil’s autobiographical self make intellectual reassessment possible.

The narrative form of *Mirrors of Memory: A Narrative* reinforces this argument. Its fragments do not ultimately demand restoration into a seamless chronological whole. Their juxtaposition allows different moments of the self to interrogate one another. The youthful self, the mature intellectual, the political observer, the individual confronted with death, and the inheritor of Moroccan cultural memory coexist within the same autobiographical space. Coherence comes from dialogue among these positions rather than from their reduction to one stable identity.

4. Morality, Self-awareness, and the Limits of Memory

The fragmented intellectual self is not produced solely through cultural and political history. Oumlil also places it within the more fundamental temporality of human mortality. Death repeatedly interrupts the narrative and confronts the autobiographical subject with the limit beyond which memory can no longer preserve personal consciousness.

In one of the most introspective passages of the book, Oumlil reflects on his awareness of death after learning that illness has entered his body. He questions the value of the distinctively human knowledge that one must die and contrasts everyday avoidance of mortality with the Sufi attempt to dissolve the boundary between life and death (Oumlil 2016, 30). The autobiographical self here encounters a form of knowledge that it cannot convert into mastery. Awareness intensifies rather than eliminates vulnerability.

Mortality changes the function of memory. Remembrance no longer concerns only the interpretation of historical experience; it becomes a response to finitude. The autobiographical act preserves experiences precisely because the living subject recognizes that its temporal existence will end. Memory offers no escape from death, but it establishes continuity between a finite life and forms of cultural transmission that can extend beyond it.

The narrative repeatedly connects death to recollection. Memories of relatives, inherited religious representations, bodily vulnerability, and philosophical reflections on finitude coexist in the same textual space. Personal mortality therefore becomes culturally mediated. The individual does not encounter death through private consciousness alone. Religious narratives, family memories, philosophical concepts, and collective rituals provide languages through which mortality becomes thinkable.

This point complicates any strict division between individual and collective memory. Assmann argues that even apparently intimate acts of recollection acquire order through socially available structures that connect personal consciousness to a cultural world (2006, 1–2). Oumlil’s reflections on death confirm this principle. His awareness

remains personal, but its expression draws on philosophical, religious, familial, and cultural repertoires that precede the individual.

The fragile self that emerges from these passages differs sharply from models of autobiographical identity based on complete sovereignty. Memory cannot reconstruct everything, nor can reflection overcome finitude. Yet these limits do not render autobiography meaningless. They make self-representation more critical because the subject becomes aware of the incompleteness of its own perspective.

The fragmented intellectual self therefore includes an existential dimension. Its incompleteness arises not only from historical and ideological contradiction but also from the finite character of human consciousness. Oumlil's text resists the fantasy that knowledge can produce a fully transparent self. The autobiographical subject remains partial, situated, and mortal.

5. Cultural Memory Between Preservation and Transformation

If personal memory alone cannot explain autobiographical identity, *Mirrors of Memory* must also be read through the concept of cultural memory. Erll defines cultural memory not as a passive collective storehouse but as a process through which societies produce, circulate, preserve, and reinterpret representations of the past (2011). Literature occupies an important place within this process because it does not simply transmit existing memories. It reshapes them and returns transformed representations of the past to the culture from which it emerges (Erll 2011, 147).

Oumlil's narrative performs this function in several ways. Personal recollections constantly expand into reflections on Morocco's cultural history. The remembered self becomes a point of entry into discussions of architecture, food, religion, cities, colonial encounters, intellectual traditions, social change, political authority, and historical consciousness. Autobiography thereby exceeds private reminiscence.

Oumlil's phrase "a museum within memory" (2016, 68) captures the paradox of this process. A museum preserves objects by removing them from their original contexts and reorganizing them within a new interpretive space. Autobiographical memory operates similarly. It preserves selected fragments of experience, yet their meanings change when the narrator relocates them within the retrospective structure of the text.

The metaphor is particularly significant because Oumlil remains suspicious of forms of preservation that freeze cultures in time. Memory should not transform heritage into an untouchable museum of authenticity. Cultural inheritance retains value only when it participates in contemporary intellectual life. The past must remain open to reinterpretation.

This distinction allows Oumlil to avoid two opposite positions. The first treats modernity as a demand for radical historical amnesia; the second turns cultural memory into a defense of immutable tradition. *Mirrors of Memory: A Narrative* refuses both. Memory preserves continuity, but critical reflection prevents preservation from becoming intellectual confinement.

The relationship between memory and the future becomes explicit when Oumlil asks why human beings imagine the future through the past. Human beings, he argues, preserve documents, recover traces, arrange events, divide historical periods, and create narratives of time (2016, 27–28). Memory therefore does more than look backward. It supplies the symbolic and historical materials through which the future becomes imaginable.

This prospective dimension is essential to the article's argument. Cultural memory becomes productive when it provides resources for transformation rather than commands for repetition. The past enters the present as material for thought. Its authority is consequently subject to criticism.

Ricoeur's distinction between memory and history further illuminates this point. Memory remains vulnerable to selectivity, manipulation, and forgetting, but historical discourse cannot completely emancipate itself from the human need to remember (Ricoeur 2004). Oumlil's narrative stages this tension rather than attempting to solve it. His memories contain personal impressions and cultural interpretations, yet he continually connects them to

broader questions of historical representation.

The autobiographical narrator therefore assumes a double role. He is a witness to a particular life and a critic of the cultural structures through which that life becomes intelligible. His authority does not derive from the claim that memory perfectly reproduces historical reality. It derives from his willingness to expose memory itself to reflection.

5.1 The Self Between Tradition and Modernity

The cultural work of memory becomes most visible in Oumlil's treatment of tradition and modernity. These categories recur throughout his intellectual project, but *Mirrors of Memory: A Narrative* places them within lived experience. The opposition no longer appears simply as a theoretical problem. It becomes part of the autobiographical subject's own constitution.

The fragmented intellectual self contains both inheritances. Oumlil belongs to Moroccan and Arab-Islamic cultural traditions, yet his intellectual formation also draws on modern political thought, philosophy, human rights discourse, democratic theory, and transnational intellectual exchange. Neither domain remains external to him. The conflict between them therefore occurs within the self.

This internalization changes the character of cultural criticism. The intellectual cannot criticize tradition from an entirely external position because inherited cultural forms participate in his own identity. Yet he cannot criticize modernity as though it were merely a foreign imposition because modern concepts have also entered the language through which contemporary political and ethical questions are navigated and articulated.

Khatibi's call for a plural critique offers an illuminating parallel. His thought rejects the idea that decolonization can occur through a simple return to an uncontaminated cultural origin. Intellectual liberation instead requires criticism of both colonial epistemologies and inherited structures that reproduce intellectual domination (Khatibi 2019). Oumlil's autobiographical self occupies a comparable space of double interrogation.

This position explains the importance he assigns to difference. A viable modern political and cultural order cannot depend on homogeneity because the modern subject itself is already internally plural. Difference is not an accidental disturbance imposed upon an originally unified identity; it is one of the conditions under which contemporary identity exists.

Oumlil therefore treats intellectual certainty with suspicion when certainty requires withdrawal from historical change. In his reflection on the "fragments" of the self, he contrasts the unstable intellectual confronted with multiple currents of thought with ideological subjects who protect certainty through doctrinal closure (2016, 152–53). Fragmentation appears uncomfortable, but it also protects the intellectual from dogmatism.

The fragmented self thus becomes ethically significant. Its awareness of its own plurality makes absolute claims to cultural purity more difficult to sustain. Intellectual self-criticism begins with recognition that identity has been formed through encounters, inheritances, ruptures, and translations that cannot be reduced to a single origin.

Mirrors of Memory: A Narrative consequently transforms the autobiographical question "Who am I?" into the historical and cultural question "Through which memories, ideas, conflicts, and inherited structures has this self become possible?" That shift moves autobiography away from confession and toward intellectual history.

6. Memory, Narration and Democratic Plurality

The transition from individual to collective identity gives Oumlil's cultural memory an explicitly political dimension. The narrative does not isolate personal recollection from the historical formation of Morocco. Individual memories repeatedly intersect with questions of national consciousness, colonial disruption, cultural change, political authority, social fragmentation, and intellectual responsibility.

Memory acts here as both a bridge and a critical instrument. It links past and present, but it also exposes

conflicts concealed by narratives of uninterrupted national continuity. Historical memory cannot simply confirm the nation's preferred image of itself. It must also preserve discontinuities, failures, marginalized experiences, and unresolved contradictions.

This conception approaches what Ricoeur calls the ethical problem of the "duty of memory" (2004, 87). The duty does not require limitless commemoration or the uncritical sanctification of collective memory. It concerns responsibility toward the past and toward those whose experiences risk disappearance from dominant narratives.

Oumlil similarly distrusts collective identities that suppress plurality in the name of unity. His broader defense of difference enters *Mirrors of Memory: A Narrative* through the autobiographical subject's own experience of heterogeneous ideas. The intellectual self becomes an implicit model for the plural political community: coherence does not require the elimination of difference.

Cultural memory plays an important role in this model because democratic plurality cannot emerge from historical amnesia. Citizens inherit different relationships to culture, religion, language, class, region, and political history. These memories may conflict, but the solution cannot be their absorption into a single authorized account of collective identity.

At the same time, Oumlil does not treat fragmentation itself as a sufficient political virtue. A society composed of disconnected memories would struggle to maintain shared political life. The challenge lies in establishing forms of collective identity that accommodate difference without surrendering the possibility of common institutions, civic responsibility, and historical continuity.

Memory therefore performs two apparently contradictory tasks. It preserves attachment to inherited cultural worlds while allowing their meanings to change. It establishes continuity while exposing rupture. It contributes to collective identity while resisting claims that such identity must be uniform.

This tension gives Oumlil's autobiography relevance beyond the reconstruction of one intellectual biography. His personal memory becomes a laboratory in which broader questions of postcolonial Moroccan selfhood can be examined. The fragmented intellectual self reflects a society whose historical consciousness has likewise been shaped by colonial disruption, inherited traditions, nationalism, global cultural exchange, and competing visions of modernity.

Yet the narrative does not present fragmentation as Morocco's final condition. Memory creates the possibility of historical self-knowledge, and historical self-knowledge can support transformation. The past becomes useful not because it contains *fait accompli* explanations but because critical engagement with it clarifies how contemporary structures came into existence.

In this sense, the autobiographical act acquires civic significance. Oumlil places the intellectual within a continuing conversation about the society to which he belongs. His memories do not authorize him to speak for the nation as a whole. Rather, they allow him to situate one intellectual life within the conflicts through which national identity continues to be negotiated.

7. Autobiography as Cultural Critique

The hybrid character of Oumlil's autobiography ultimately explains its intellectual force. The text is autobiographical without remaining confined to biography. It is philosophical without becoming a systematic philosophical treatise. It records cultural experience without presenting itself as ethnography, and it reflects on history without claiming the authority of conventional historiography.

This generic instability corresponds to the fragmented self at the center of the narrative. A heterogeneous intellectual identity requires a heterogeneous form. The movement among memory, historical commentary, philosophical reflection, anecdote, and cultural observation allows Oumlil to reproduce textually the plurality that defines his intellectual subjectivity.

Within this purview, autobiography can be read as a practice of cultural criticism. Memory provides the material, but criticism determines its intellectual function. The narrator repeatedly asks what remembered experiences disclose about larger systems of meaning: how societies organize time, how traditions acquire authority, how political systems construct historical consciousness, how religious narratives mediate mortality, and how intellectuals position themselves between cultural inheritance and social transformation.

This critical function distinguishes Oumlil's narrative from nostalgic autobiography. Nostalgia often seeks emotional reconciliation with a lost past. Oumlil rarely grants the past such innocence. What memory recovers remains subject to historical judgment. Cultural inheritance can sustain identity, but it can also restrict intellectual autonomy. Modern transformation can expand freedom, but it can also reproduce forms of domination. Neither past nor present receives instinctive normative privilege.

The autobiographical self therefore remains deliberately unsettled. Its fragmentation keeps judgment open. Rather than resolving contradiction through a retrospective narrative of personal triumph, Oumlil preserves intellectual uncertainty as part of the value of remembrance.

This uncertainty is not equivalent to relativism. The narrative remains oriented toward recognizable ethical and political commitments: plurality, intellectual freedom, critical inquiry, human dignity, democratic participation, and resistance to authoritarian forms of knowledge. Fragmentation makes these commitments possible because it undermines claims that any inherited system possesses an exclusive right to define truth, identity, or historical destiny.

The fragmented intellectual self is thus generative rather than merely damaged. It turns discontinuity into dialogue and cultural plurality into a resource for critical thought. Memory makes that transformation possible because it keeps different temporal and intellectual versions of the self-available to one another.

8. Conclusion

Ali Oumlil's *Mirrors of Memory: A Narrative* presents autobiography as an intellectual encounter between personal recollection and cultural history. The text does not reconstruct the author's life as a unified chronological sequence. It assembles memories, places, philosophical questions, historical reflections, deaths, cultural observations, and political concerns into a narrative whose form reflects the fragmented consciousness it examines.

This article has described that subject as the fragmented intellectual self. Fragmentation arises from Oumlil's location at the intersection of multiple temporal, cultural, and epistemological worlds: Arab-Islamic intellectual traditions and modern thought, colonial history and postcolonial transformation, personal experience and national memory, local inheritance and global circulation. These forces prevent the autobiographical subject from claiming a simple or original identity.

Yet fragmentation does not destroy the self. Memory converts it into a productive form of intellectual plurality. Through remembrance, dispersed experiences enter into new relationships. The past becomes available for criticism rather than mere preservation, while the present becomes intelligible as the outcome of historical processes rather than as an autonomous moment.

Cultural memory is central to this transformation. It connects personal experience with collective history and preserves the cultural materials through which individuals and communities interpret themselves. At the same time, Oumlil refuses to treat memory as a sanctuary of unquestionable tradition. Memory must remain open to reinterpretation if it is to contribute to intellectual and political renewal. Hence, the narrative places the self between continuity and rupture. It needs the past but cannot simply return to it. It participates in modernity but cannot accept modernity as a culturally neutral destination. Its intellectual task consists instead in negotiating this unstable site through criticism, dialogue, and historical consciousness.

Oumlil's autobiography offers more than an account of Ali Oumlil's intellectual life. It articulates a model of

postcolonial selfhood in which cultural complexity is morphed into a condition of critical thought. The fragmented intellectual self does not overcome its contradictions by recovering a lost unity. It learns to inhabit them. In that sense, remembrance becomes an act directed as much toward the future as toward the past: it preserves what deserves continuity, subjects inherited certainties to criticism, and creates intellectual space for plurality, difference, and transformation.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ORCID iD: 0009-0000-9256-242X

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Disclosure: The authors declare that no artificial intelligence tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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