Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences

Manuscript 1608

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ORIGINAL STUDY

Azerbaijani Enlightenment at the Turn of the 19th–20th Centuries: East–West Intellectual Dialogue and Cultural Modernity

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the Azerbaijani Enlightenment of the late 19th–early 20th centuries as representing a distinct intellectual formation that emerged from sustained dialogue between Eastern traditions and Western modernity. It argues that Azerbaijani enlighteners did not merely obliviously assimilate European Enlightenment ideas, but actively reinterpreted them through the prism of local cultural, religious, and socio-political frameworks. Drawing on a comparative East–West perspective, the article analyses the philosophical writings, literary texts, and satirical journalism associated with such intellectuals as Mirza Fatali Akhundzadeh, Hasan bey Zardabi, Jalil Mammadguluzadeh, and Mammad Amin Rasulzade (Georgeon, 1996; Habibbayli, 2014; Swietochowski, 1995). Methodologically, the study combines historical-comparative analysis with intellectual history and discourse analysis. It demonstrates that the Azerbaijani Enlightenment constituted a hybrid form of cultural modernity that contributed to debates on nationalism, secularism, education, and statehood in the Caucasus during the latter period of the Tsarist Russian Empire. Positioning this movement amidst broader discussions of multiple modernities, the article highlights its relevance for understanding the intellectual transformations in Central Eurasia immediately after the fall of the Russian Empire and prior to incorporation into the Soviet Union.

Keywords: Azerbaijani enlightenment, Intellectual history, East–west dialogue, Caucasus, Modernity, Cultural heritage

Introduction

The Azerbaijani Enlightenment of the late 19th–early 20th centuries represents a formative, yet underexplored chapter in the intellectual history of the Caucasus. Emerging at the intersection of Imperial Russian governance, Islamic cultural traditions, and European

Received 18 May 2026; revised 27 June 2026; accepted 5 October 2026.
Available online 15 October 2026

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https://doi.org/10.5782/2223-2621.1608
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modernity, Azerbaijani Enlightenment thought developed as a distinct response to both internal social challenges and external epistemic influences (Swietochowski, 1995, pp. 38–42). Rather than constituting a derivative imitation of the Western Enlightenment, it articulated a locally grounded project of cultural reform that sought to reconcile reason, education, and ethical responsibility.

Historians have emphasised that Azerbaijani enlighteners operated within a complex semi-colonial environment that constrained political action whilst simultaneously expanding access to global intellectual currents (Georgeon, 1996, pp. 101–105). In this context, literature, journalism, and satire emerged as the primary vehicles for social critique and public engagement. Such intellectuals as Mirza Fatali Akhundzadeh, Hasan bey Zardabi, and Jalil Mammadguluzadeh played pivotal roles in shaping a reformist discourse oriented towards the emergence of secular education, linguistic modernisation, and civic consciousness (Habibbayli, 2014, pp. 92–97).

This comparative East–West framing is central to understanding the Azerbaijani Enlightenment. Enlighteners consistently juxtaposed European models of rationality and social organisation with local traditions, evaluating both through a critical lens. This dialogical posturing enabled them to appropriate Enlightenment concepts selectively, whilst resisting cultural assimilation or epistemic dependency (Abdullayeva, 2014). Such an approach aligns with broader theoretical discussions of multiple modernities, challenging linear and Eurocentric narratives of intellectual development (Eisenstadt, 2000).

This article examines the Azerbaijani Enlightenment as a form of cultural modernity emanating from intellectual exchange between the East and West. By analysing philosophical writings, journalistic texts, and satirical publications, it argues that Azerbaijani enlighteners developed a hybrid reformist discourse that contributed to the national consciousness and broader debates on modernity in the Muslim world.

Theoretical framework and methodology

The theoretical framework draws on comparative intellectual history and the overriding concept of multiple modernities. Rather than treating the Enlightenment as a singular European phenomenon, the article adopts an interpretive approach that emphasises cultural translation, adaptation, and local approaches (Eisenstadt, 2000, pp. 1–15). This perspective facilitates the analysis of Azerbaijani Enlightenment thought as an autonomous, yet interconnected, intellectual formation.

The article employs the qualitative textual analysis of primary sources, including philosophical essays, newspaper articles, and satirical texts published between the 1870s–early 1900s. These materials are examined in relation to secondary scholarship in intellectual history, post-imperial studies, and comparative literature (Swietochowski, 1995, pp. 45–50; Habibbayli, 2014, pp. 88–91). Particular attention is paid to moments of explicit comparison between the Eastern and Western models of society, governance, and morality.

The comparative dimension focuses on conceptual parallels, rather than direct influence. Such European Enlightenment ideas as rationalism, secular education, and civic virtue are analysed as reference points through which Azerbaijani intellectuals articulated their reformist agendas (Georgeon, 1996, pp. 98–103). Simultaneously, the study acknowledges the mediating role of Russian Imperial institutions and transregional Muslim networks in shaping these exchanges (Aliyeva, 2019).

Finally, the analysis integrates discourse-oriented methods to assess how satire and journalism functioned as Enlightenment tools. By examining the narrative strategies, rhetorical devices, and visual symbolism in the pioneering satirical journal *Molla Nasreddin*, the

article demonstrates how cultural media facilitated critical reflection and public participation under conditions of censorship (Jabbarova, 2019, pp. 210–215).

Historical context: Azerbaijan within imperial modernity

The Azerbaijani Enlightenment emerged within the broader framework of imperial modernity, being shaped by the political, administrative, and cultural structures of the Tsarist Russian Empire. Following the incorporation of Northern Azerbaijan into the Empire during the early 19th century, new institutional mechanisms, such as schools, printing houses, administrative centres and communication networks, facilitated the circulation of ideas whilst simultaneously reinforcing colonial control (Swietochowski, 1995). Such cities as Baku, Tbilisi, and Shusha became hubs of intellectual exchange, connecting Azerbaijani thinkers with Russian, European, and Middle Eastern concepts.

Economic transformation further accelerated these processes. The rapid development of the oil industry in Baku in the late 19th century generated a new social strata, particularly the cosmopolitan urban intelligentsia and entrepreneurial class, which played an instrumental role in undertaking cultural and educational reform (Aliyeva, 2019). This emergent intelligentsia increasingly viewed enlightenment, education, and journalism as the preeminent tools for social transformation and national awakening.

Simultaneously, imperial governance imposed significant constraints on political participation and cultural autonomy. Azerbaijani intellectuals were thus compelled to articulate reformist ideas within a semi-public sphere, harnessing literature, satire, and cultural critique, rather than overt political comment and activism (Georgeon, 1996). This helped shaped the distinctive character of Azerbaijani Enlightenment discourse, which combined cultural reform with implicit political critique.

Importantly, the historical context of the Azerbaijani Enlightenment was marked by constant negotiation between multiple cultural spheres. Islamic ethical traditions, Persian literary heritage, and Turkic linguistic identity coexisted with Russian administrative norms and European philosophical influences. This heterogeneity facilitated both intellectual synthesis and experimentation. It distinguished the Azerbaijani milieu from both Western European and Ottoman Enlightenment trajectories (Habibbayli, 2014).

Philosophical foundations: Enlightenment, reason, and cultural continuity

The foundations of the Azerbaijani Enlightenment were shaped by a complex synthesis of rationalist critique, ethical reform, and cultural continuity. Azerbaijani enlighteners did not perceive enlightenment solely as a rupture with the past, but framed reason and education as instruments for revitalising cultural heritage and moral values within a modern context (Habibbayli, 2014, pp. 92–97). This approach distinguished Azerbaijani Enlightenment thought from the more radical secular models prevalent in Western Europe.

Mirza Fatali Akhundzadeh occupies a central position in this intellectual landscape. His philosophical writings and dramatic works articulated a sustained critique of dogmatism and intellectual stagnation, advocating rational inquiry and freedom of thought as prerequisites for social progress (Georgeon, 1996, pp. 101–105). Simultaneously, Akhundzadeh emphasised the importance of linguistic and cultural reform, viewing the modernisation of language, alphabet and education as essential to the preservation of national identity (Swietochowski, 1995, pp. 45–48).

Recent scholarship further highlighted the role of Azerbaijani enlighteners in safeguarding cultural heritage during periods of rapid social transformation. As demonstrated in a

recent *ANAS Report*, enlighteners conceptualised cultural heritage not as a static repository of traditions, but a dynamic resource that could be mobilised for civic education and national self-awareness (Author, 2025, pp. 63–65). This underscores the integrative nature of Azerbaijani Enlightenment philosophy, which sought to harmonise innovation with continuity.

Hasan bey Zardabi's reformist vision exemplifies this philosophical orientation. Through his journalistic activities, he promoted scientific knowledge, agricultural education, and social responsibility, framing enlightenment as a moral duty toward society (Mamedzade, 2015, pp. 120–124). His work illustrates how philosophical ideas were translated into practical strategies aimed at improving everyday life, whilst reinforcing cultural cohesion.

These philosophical foundations collectively reveal an Enlightenment project rooted in ethical rationalism and cultural responsibility. Azerbaijani enlighteners positioned themselves as mediators between tradition and modernity, articulating a reformist discourse that remains central to understanding the intellectual history of the Caucasus.

Satire and cultural critique: *Molla Nasreddin* as a vehicle of enlightenment

Satire constituted one of the most effective and innovative instruments of the Azerbaijani Enlightenment. The satirical magazine *Molla Nasreddin*, founded and edited by Jalil Mammadguluzadeh, emerged as a critical platform for exposing the social injustice, intellectual complacency, and cultural contradictions within Azerbaijani society and beyond (Jabbarova, 2019, pp. 210–215). Using humour, caricature, and irony, the magazine communicated complex Enlightenment ideas to a broad readership.

Molla Nasreddin's satirical discourse operated simultaneously on cultural and political levels. It criticised clerical hypocrisy, gender inequality, and authoritarian governance, amongst other subjects, whilst also addressing the erosion of cultural values under imperial rule (Georgeon, 1996, pp. 110–113). Satire enabled enlighteners to navigate censorship and articulate dissent in indirect, yet powerful ways, fostering a culture of critical reflection.

Importantly, satire also functioned as a primary mechanism for preserving cultural heritage. By employing vernacular language, folkloric motifs and familiar cultural symbols, *Molla Nasreddin* reinforced a sense of collective memory and linguistic identity (Aliyeva, 2025, p. 66). This strategy aligned with the broader Azerbaijani Enlightenment objective of cultural preservation through reform, rather than rejection.

Comparatively, scholars have noted the parallels between Azerbaijani satirical practices and those of French Enlightenment figures such as Voltaire, who similarly employed irony and satire to challenge dogma and social inequality (Pashayev, 2011, pp. 58–61). However, unlike their Western counterparts, Azerbaijani satirists operated within a colonial and post-imperial environment, which shaped both the tone and objectives of their critique.

The transregional influence of *Molla Nasreddin* further underscores its significance. Circulating widely across the Caucasus, Iran, and Central Asia, this groundbreaking magazine contributed to a shared reformist discourse within the broader Muslim world (Brown, 1997, pp. 72–75). As such, satire served not only as a literary genre, but as a crucial medium of enlightenment and indicator of cultural modernity.

East–West intellectual dialogue and comparative modernity

The intellectual dialogue between East and West constituted a defining dimension of Azerbaijani Enlightenment thought at the crossroads of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Azerbaijani enlighteners did not merely appropriate and obliviously apply European ideas, but engaged in a selective and critical appropriation of Western modernity, adapting Enlightenment principles to local historical, cultural, and religious contexts (Habibbayli, 2014, pp. 101–106). This dialogical process produced a distinctive model of comparative modernity, situated at the intersection of Europe, the Caucasus, and the Muslim world.

European Enlightenment philosophy, particularly French rationalism and liberal political thought, reached Azerbaijan primarily through Russian intellectual channels. Such philosophers and authors as Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Diderot influenced Azerbaijani reformers by providing conceptual tools for criticising absolutism, clerical authority, and social inequality (Abdullayeva, 2014, pp. 27–31). However, Azerbaijani enlighteners diverged from Western paradigms in their treatment of tradition. Rather than advocating for a radical rupture with the past, they sought to reinterpret cultural and religious heritage by applying methodology that is compatible with modern rationality.

Mirza Fatali Akhundzadeh exemplifies this comparative orientation. Despite being deeply influenced by European secularism and rationalist philosophy, he framed modernisation as an internal cultural reform, rather than an external imitation (Georgeon, 1996, pp. 97–102). His critique of religious dogmatism echoed European Enlightenment anticlericalism, yet this was articulated within the socio-cultural realities of a Muslim society under Imperial Tsarist Russian rule. This dual positioning allowed Akhundzadeh to function as a mediator between East and West, translating European ideas into a language intelligible to local audiences.

The East–West dialogue was further institutionalised through print culture. Journals such as *Hayat* and *Molla Nasreddin* served as intellectual platforms where European political concepts, such as citizenship, constitutionalism, and civil rights, were debated alongside indigenous notions of justice, morality, and communal responsibility (Pashayev, 2011, pp. 60–64). Jalil Mammadguluzadeh repeatedly reiterated that freedom and statehood could not be transplanted mechanically and directly from the West, needing to be cultivated through education and cultural awareness, rooted in national traditions (Habibbayli, 2014, p. 109).

Comparative modernity in the Azerbaijani context was also shaped by the experience of colonial and semi-colonial governance. Unlike Western Europe, modernisation unfolded under the constraints of the Russian Empire, which imposed administrative reforms, whilst limiting political autonomy (Swietochowski, 1995, pp. 52–56). This fostered a critical awareness among Azerbaijani intellectuals, who distinguished between technological and educational progress on the one hand, and political subjugation on the other. Consequently, Enlightenment discourse became inseparable from questions of national self-determination and cultural survival.

Recent studies have emphasised that this East–West intellectual synthesis contributed directly to the preservation of cultural heritage. Enlighteners viewed comparative engagement with Europe as a means of strengthening, rather than dissolving, national identity (Aliyeva, 2025, pp. 64–67). By reframing cultural heritage as a living and evolving system, they resisted both cultural isolationism and uncritical Westernisation.

Azerbaijani Enlightenment thought also shared similarities with reformist movements in Central Asia and the Ottoman Empire, where intellectuals likewise negotiated between Islamic traditions and European modernity (Brown, 1997, pp. 73–76). However, the Azerbaijani case remains distinctive due to its multilingual environment, vibrant satirical culture, and early development of a secular public sphere.

Ultimately, it is undeniable that the East–West intellectual dialogue component in Azerbaijani Enlightenment thought produced a form of comparative modernity that cannot be reduced to accusations of imitation or dependency. It represented a conscious effort to

integrate universal Enlightenment values with existing national cultural traditions, laying the philosophical groundwork for modern Azerbaijani identity and contributing towards broader debates on non-Western modernities.

Results

The analysis demonstrates that Azerbaijani enlighteners played a decisive role in shaping a modern socio-philosophical consciousness amongst the intelligentsia, grounded in both national traditions and universal Enlightenment values. Their intellectual activity resulted in three interrelated outcomes: the formation of a modern national identity, the reconfiguration of cultural heritage as a dynamic resource, and the institutionalisation of Enlightenment discourse through literature, journalism, and education.

First, the study confirms that Azerbaijani Enlightenment thought significantly contributed to the articulation of national identity. Enlighteners consistently emphasised the importance of language, historical memory, and cultural continuity as constituting the foundations of collective self-awareness (Habibbayli, 2014, pp. 92–99). Through journals such as *Hayat* and *Molla Nasreddin*, intellectuals addressed broad audiences, explaining political rights, civic responsibility, and the concept of the nation in accessible and often satirical forms (Pashayev, 2011, pp. 61–63). This enabled the diffusion of Enlightenment ideas beyond elite circles and fostered popular engagement with modern political concepts.

Second, the findings indicate that cultural heritage preservation was never treated as a conservation or antiquarian project. On the contrary, enlighteners redefined heritage as an evolving system that was compatible with progress and modernisation. Figures such as M.F. Akhundzadeh and H. Zardabi argued that cultural traditions must be critically reassessed to eliminate superstition and stagnation, whilst preserving the ethical and aesthetic values essential to national cohesion (Georgeon, 1996, pp. 99–101; Mamedzade, 2015, pp. 43–44). This enabled Azerbaijani intellectuals to resist both colonial cultural assimilation and rigid traditionalism.

Third, satire emerged as one of the most effective instruments of the Enlightenment. Satirical critique functioned not merely as a literary genre, but as a socio-philosophical method. Through the application of humour, irony, and caricature, *Molla Nasreddin* exposed contradictions between proclaimed moral values and actual social realities, targeting clerical hypocrisy, bureaucratic corruption, and social injustice (Jabbarova, 2019). This resonated strongly with the public and reinforced the Enlightenment ideals of rational inquiry and moral responsibility.

This comparative analysis further indicates that Azerbaijani Enlightenment outcomes shared typological similarities with European Enlightenment movements whilst remaining context-specific. Like their European counterparts, Azerbaijani thinkers promoted secular education, freedom of thought, and legal/gender equality (Abdullayeva, 2014, pp. 29–34). However, unlike in Western Europe, where modernisation often entailed a sharp rupture with religious tradition, Azerbaijani enlighteners pursued reform through reinterpretation, rather than rejection. This nuanced strategy facilitated the coexistence of Islamic ethical frameworks with modern civic ideals.

Furthermore, the research highlights the political implications of the Enlightenment. The dissemination of modernist ideas directly influenced the emergence of democratic and republican thought in the early 20th century, culminating in the establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) in 1918, following the demise of the Tsarist Russian Empire. Intellectual leaders such as M.A. Rasulzade, leader of the ADR (1918–21), articulated Enlightenment principles in explicitly political terms, linking cultural renewal with national sovereignty (Rasulzade, 1999, pp. 22–23).

The results collectively confirm that the Azerbaijani Enlightenment was a multidimensional phenomenon that combined philosophical reflection, cultural critique, and political engagement. Its legacy persists in contemporary debates on national identity, secularism, and cultural heritage preservation in Azerbaijan and the wider Caucasus region (Aliyeva, 2025, pp. 65–67).

Discussion

These findings facilitate a broader theoretical discussion on the Azerbaijani Enlightenment as a form of comparative and non-Western modernity. Unlike the classical Western Enlightenment, which emerged in relatively autonomous political contexts, the Azerbaijani Enlightenment developed under imperial domination and cultural asymmetry. These historical conditions fundamentally shaped both its objectives and intellectual strategies (Swietochowski, 1995, pp. 48–56).

From a comparative perspective, the French Enlightenment emphasised universal reason, secularism, and the dismantling of absolutist and clerical authority. Such authors and philosophers as Voltaire and Montesquieu conceptualised freedom primarily in legal and institutional terms, advocating for constitutional governance and civil rights (Abdullayeva, 2014, pp. 27–30). Azerbaijani enlighteners adopted these principles selectively, translating them into a socio-cultural programme aimed at moral renewal and national awakening, rather than immediate political revolution. This selective appropriation reflects what contemporary scholarship defines as “adaptive modernity”, rather than oblivious derivative imitation.

Russian Enlightenment traditions played an intermediary role in this process. Through educational institutions, administrative reforms, and literary circulation, Russian intellectual culture functioned as both a conduit and a filter for Western ideas (Georgeon, 1996, pp. 101–104). Azerbaijani intellectuals benefited from access to the European philosophical discourse, but remained critically aware of the colonial nature of imperial modernisation. Consequently, Enlightenment discourse in Azerbaijan combined progressive aspirations with anti-colonial consciousness, distinguishing it from both Western European and Russian models.

A key element is the relationship between the Enlightenment and cultural heritage. Western Enlightenment narratives often positioned tradition as an obstacle to progress. In contrast, Azerbaijani enlighteners conceptualised heritage as a resource for modernisation, provided it underwent rational reinterpretation (Habibbayli, 2014, pp. 105–110). This position facilitated the preservation of linguistic, literary, and ethical traditions whilst simultaneously advocating for the implementation of secular education and scientific rationality. Such an approach aligns with contemporary theories of plural modernities, which reject a single, linear model of historical development.

Satire, particularly as practiced in *Molla Nasreddin*, deserves special attention within this discussion. In European contexts, satire functioned as a tool of bourgeois critique, whereas in Azerbaijan, it assumed a broader socio-philosophical role. By exposing the contradictions between religious rhetoric and social reality, satirical discourse operated as a mechanism of cultural self-reflection and collective pedagogy (Jabbarova, 2019). This distinguishes Azerbaijani Enlightenment satire as both a literary and epistemological practice.

The discussion also highlights the internal tensions within Azerbaijani Enlightenment thought. Whilst united by a commitment to modernisation, intellectuals differed in their political orientations, ranging from liberal nationalism to socialist and Marxist frameworks

(Mamedzade, 2015, pp. 42–45). These divergences reflect the complexity of intellectual life in a society undergoing rapid social transformation and underscore the non-monolithic character of Enlightenment ideology.

In the post-Soviet context, reassessing the Azerbaijani Enlightenment carries particular significance. Soviet historiography often reduced Enlightenment figures to the precursors of socialist ideology, marginalising knowledge of their liberal, national, and cultural dimensions. On the other hand, contemporary scholarship emphasises their role in shaping civic consciousness, democratic values, and cultural resilience (Aliyeva, 2019; Aliyeva, 2025, pp. 61–66). This reevaluation aligns Azerbaijani Enlightenment studies with broader international debates on decolonising intellectual history.

Overall, the discussion confirms that the Azerbaijani Enlightenment represents a distinctive model of intellectual modernisation, due to its location between East and the West. Its legacy challenges Eurocentric assumptions about modernity, and demonstrates the capacity of non-Western societies to generate original philosophical responses to global intellectual currents.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the Azerbaijani Enlightenment of the late 19th–early 20th centuries constituted a distinctive intellectual phenomenon, albeit shaped by sustained East–West dialogue and comparative modernity. Azerbaijani enlighteners did not simply adopt European Enlightenment ideas, but reinterpreted them through the prism of local cultural, historical, and religious frameworks, producing an original model of intellectual modernisation (Habibbayli, 2014, pp. 101–110).

The findings confirm that Enlightenment thought in Azerbaijan was inseparable from the preservation and transformation of cultural heritage. Enlighteners perceived heritage not as a static repository of the past, but as a dynamic resource, capable of supporting social reform, civic education, and national self-awareness (Aliyeva, 2019; Aliyeva, 2025, pp. 64–67). Through literature, journalism, and satire, they articulated new conceptions of personality, citizenship, and statehood, whilst maintaining continuity with linguistic and ethical traditions.

This comparative analysis underscores that the Azerbaijani Enlightenment differed fundamentally from its Western European counterparts. Despite sharing such universal principles as rationality, secular education, and freedom of thought, it emerged under the conditions of imperial domination and cultural asymmetry, which infused Enlightenment discourse with anti-colonial and national dimensions (Swietochowski, 1995, pp. 52–56). This context necessitated adaptive strategies that balanced modernisation with cultural resilience.

A key contribution of Azerbaijani enlighteners lies in their use of satire as a socio-philosophical instrument. The journal *Molla Nasreddin* exemplified how cultural critique could function simultaneously as public pedagogy and political commentary, fostering critical consciousness across social strata (Pashayev, 2011; Jabbarova, 2019). This practice positioned satire at the core of Enlightenment practice, rather than at its margins.

The discussion also highlights the long-term significance of Enlightenment ideas for contemporary Azerbaijani society. Post-Soviet scholarship has increasingly recognised enlighteners as foundational figures in the development of democratic values, secular governance, and cultural pluralism (Mamedzade, 2015). Their intellectual legacy continues to inform debates on national identity, modernisation, and the role of culture in public life.

In conclusion, the Azerbaijani Enlightenment represents a compelling exemplar of non-Western modernity that challenges both linear and Eurocentric models of intellectual

history. By integrating universal Enlightenment ideals with national cultural traditions, Azerbaijani thinkers contributed to broader global discussions on plural modernities and the preservation of cultural heritage amidst periods of rapid social change. Further comparative research across the Caucasus and Central Asia may deepen understanding of these processes and their relevance for contemporary cultural and political development.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Author contribution

Zohra Aliyeva was responsible for the conceptualization, investigation, analysis, and interpretation of the findings, as well as writing, reviewing, and editing the manuscript. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

AI usage statement

During the preparation of this work, the author used Gemini in order to improve the language, grammar, and readability of the manuscript. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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