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The embedded historian: an exploratory comparative reading of historiographic metafiction in popular feminist literature

ABSTRACT

Objective: To examine how popular feminist narratives recover historical memory from a narrative perspective through a comparative analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story "The Headstrong Historian" and the epilogue "Historical Notes" from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Methodology: This exploratory study employed a qualitative approach based on a comparative reading of both texts. The analysis was grounded in Hutcheon's (1988) concept of historiographic metafiction, supplemented by secondary evidence from contemporary fiction written by women in Scotland and from widely circulated romance novels. It also distinguished between popular literature, defined by its genre and circulation, and popular feminism, understood, according to Banet-Weiser (2018), as a political identity shaped by market dynamics. Results: The findings showed that historiographic metafiction adopts opposing narrative configurations in the works analyzed. In Adichie's text, the figure of the historian integrated into the narrative restored and vindicated the historical record, while in Atwood's work, it questioned the possibility of trusting any historian incorporated into the narrative. Conclusions: The main contribution of the study was to demonstrate that the narrative recovery of historical memory does not respond to a single mechanism, but rather can develop through divergent strategies. The exploratory limitations of the analysis were acknowledged, and a specific and falsifiable line of inquiry was proposed for future comparative research on historical memory, metafiction, and popular feminist identities.

Keywords: historiographic metafiction, popular feminist literature, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Margaret Atwood, intersectionality, subaltern voice

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El historiador inmerso: una lectura comparativa y exploratoria de la metaficción historiográfica en la literatura feminista popular

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Examinar cómo las narrativas del feminismo popular recuperan la memoria histórica desde una perspectiva narrativa mediante el análisis comparativo del cuento The Headstrong

Historian de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie y el epílogo Historical Notes de The Handmaid's Tale de Margaret Atwood. Metodología: El estudio tuvo un carácter exploratorio y empleó un enfoque cualitativo basado en la lectura comparativa de ambos textos. El análisis se sustentó en el concepto de metaficción historiográfica propuesto por Hutcheon (1988), complementado con evidencia secundaria procedente de la ficción contemporánea escrita por mujeres en Escocia y de la novela romántica de gran difusión. Asimismo, distinguió entre literatura popular, definida por su género y circulación, y feminismo popular, entendido según Banet-Weiser (2018) como una identidad política configurada en las dinámicas del mercado. Resultados: Los hallazgos mostraron que la metaficción historiográfica adopta configuraciones narrativas opuestas en las obras analizadas. En el texto de Adichie, la figura del historiador integrada en la narración restauró y reivindicó el registro histórico, mientras que en la obra de Atwood cuestionó la posibilidad de confiar en cualquier historiador incorporado al relato. Conclusiones: El principal aporte del estudio consistió en demostrar que la recuperación narrativa de la memoria histórica no responde a un único mecanismo, sino que puede desarrollarse mediante estrategias divergentes. Se reconocieron los límites exploratorios del análisis y se propuso una línea específica y falsable para futuras investigaciones comparativas sobre memoria histórica, metaficción e identidades feministas populares.

Palabras clave: metaficción historiográfica; literatura feminista popular; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; Margaret Atwood; interseccionalidad; voz subalterna.

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A historiadora imersa: uma leitura comparativa e exploratória da metaficção historiográfica na literatura feminista popular

RESUMO

Objectivo: Examinar como as narrativas feministas populares recuperam a memória histórica numa perspectiva narrativa através de uma análise comparativa do conto "A Historiadora Obstinada", de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, e do epílogo "Notas Históricas", de *O Conto da Aia*, de Margaret Atwood. Metodologia: Este estudo exploratório empregou uma abordagem qualitativa baseada na leitura comparativa de ambos os textos. A análise fundamentou-se no conceito de metaficção historiográfica de Hutcheon (1988), complementado por evidências secundárias de obras de ficção contemporânea escritas por mulheres na Escócia e de romances populares de grande circulação. Distinguiu-se ainda entre literatura popular, definida pelo seu género e circulação, e feminismo popular, entendido, segundo Banet-Weiser (2018), como uma identidade política moldada pela dinâmica do mercado. Resultados: Os resultados mostraram que a metaficção historiográfica adota configurações narrativas opostas nas obras analisadas. No texto de Adichie, a figura do historiador integrada na narrativa restaurava e vindicava o registo histórico, enquanto na obra de Atwood se questionava a possibilidade de confiar em qualquer historiador incorporado na narrativa. Conclusões: A principal contribuição do estudo foi demonstrar que a recuperação narrativa da memória histórica não responde a um único mecanismo, mas pode desenvolver-se através de estratégias divergentes. As limitações exploratórias da análise foram reconhecidas e foi proposta uma linha de investigação específica e falseável para futuras pesquisas comparativas sobre memória histórica, metaficção e identidades feministas populares.

Palavras-chave: metaficção historiográfica; literatura feminista popular; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; Margaret Atwood; interseccionalidade; voz subalterna.

INTRODUCTION

Historical fiction has long served as a privileged space for negotiating the relationship between memory, history, and cultural identity. During the last four decades, feminist writers have expanded this tradition by placing women whose experiences have been marginalized, silenced, or erased by dominant historical narratives at the center of literary representation. Rather than treating history as a stable repository of objective facts, these works expose the processes through which historical knowledge is produced, contested, and transmitted across generations. In doing so, they challenge the assumption that official archives provide a complete or impartial account of the past and instead foreground alternative forms of remembrance grounded in family memory, oral testimony, and lived experience.

This literary tendency has attracted sustained scholarly attention within feminist literary criticism, postcolonial studies, and historiographic theory. Researchers have argued that contemporary feminist fiction frequently functions as a corrective to exclusionary historical traditions by recovering women's voices omitted from institutional archives and by questioning the ideological assumptions that have shaped historical knowledge. Such interpretations have contributed significantly to understanding the political and ethical dimensions of literary representations of the past, particularly in works that foreground colonialism, gender inequality, and the construction of collective memory. Nevertheless, the explanatory frameworks developed within this scholarship often privilege thematic conclusions over detailed textual demonstration, leaving important questions regarding narrative form insufficiently explored.

A recurring assumption within the existing literature is that popular feminist literature performs an act of historical recovery on behalf of women excluded from official historiography. This proposition appears across studies devoted to different authors, historical contexts, and literary traditions, gradually acquiring the status of an accepted premise within the field. Yet the evidentiary basis supporting this consensus is frequently indirect. Rather than demonstrating how individual texts accomplish such recovery through their own narrative structures, many studies rely primarily on previous critical interpretations that have reached similar conclusions about other literary works. Consequently, an important methodological imbalance has emerged between the broad theoretical claims advanced by the field and the comparatively limited number of sustained close readings designed to test those claims at the level of textual construction.

The present study approaches this imbalance not as a disagreement with previous scholarship but as an opportunity for methodological refinement. Instead of asking whether feminist historical fiction generally recovers marginalized women's histories, this article asks how a specific narrative mechanism participates in that recovery and whether its operation remains consistent across different literary works. By shifting attention from thematic affirmation to narrative architecture, the study seeks to clarify the formal processes through which fiction constructs, legitimizes, or questions historical knowledge, thereby contributing a more textually grounded perspective to ongoing debates surrounding feminist historiography and literary representation.

Within this broader debate, one narrative strategy deserves closer examination than it has generally received. Numerous feminist novels and short stories do not merely reconstruct forgotten histories but incorporate, within their own fictional worlds, characters who assume the role of historians, archivists, chroniclers, or interpreters of the past. These embedded figures transform historical recovery into a visible narrative process rather than an implicit thematic outcome. Instead of presenting history as something simply recovered, the texts dramatize the conditions under which forgotten lives become narratable, preserved, or interpreted. Despite the recurrence of this formal strategy across contemporary feminist literature, relatively little scholarship has investigated how the embedded historian functions

as a literary mechanism or whether it produces comparable epistemological effects across different narrative contexts.

This methodological gap provides the central point of departure for the present study. Existing criticism has persuasively demonstrated that feminist fiction frequently contests dominant historical narratives and creates imaginative spaces in which marginalized women recover agency and visibility. However, comparatively fewer studies have examined the formal architecture through which such recovery is constructed within individual texts. As a consequence, the relationship between narrative technique and historical representation often remains assumed rather than demonstrated. This article therefore narrows its analytical ambition deliberately. Rather than attempting to generalize across an extensive corpus of feminist fiction, it develops an exploratory comparative reading designed to examine how one specific narrative device operates in two influential literary works whose approaches to historical recovery differ substantially.

The comparison focuses on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Headstrong Historian* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. These texts were selected because both explicitly stage the production of historical knowledge within their narratives through the presence of an embedded historian. In Adichie's story, historical recovery is entrusted to a granddaughter who becomes a professional historian and reconstructs the life that colonial historiography failed to preserve. In Atwood's novel, the survivor's testimony is reframed through the intervention of future academics whose interpretation raises questions concerning institutional authority, historical mediation, and the politics of archival legitimacy. By comparing these contrasting configurations, the study examines not whether historical recovery occurs, but how the same narrative structure acquires distinct epistemological meanings according to the institutional position occupied by the historian within the fiction.

The article further acknowledges that comparative literary research is necessarily shaped by the researcher's intellectual formation and disciplinary context. The decision to examine works by Adichie and Atwood, together with comparative references to Scottish women's fiction and popular historical romance, reflects an academic trajectory grounded primarily within the Anglophone literary tradition. Scholars working from different linguistic, cultural, or theoretical perspectives might reasonably select alternative texts or identify different narrative mechanisms as more representative of feminist historical fiction. This observation is not intended as a conventional disclaimer but as an explicit recognition that interpretative choices influence the scope of literary argumentation and therefore constitute part of the methodological transparency expected in contemporary humanities research (Latha et al., 2024).

Accordingly, this article argues that the embedded historian should not be understood as a politically or narratively stable device. Although historiographic metafiction frequently employs figures responsible for preserving or interpreting the past, the political significance of those figures depends upon their relationship to the institutions through which historical knowledge acquires legitimacy. The comparative analysis demonstrates that identical formal structures may produce fundamentally different understandings of historical recovery. In one case, the embedded historian functions as an instrument of restoration, reconnecting marginalized experience with historical recognition. In the other, the same narrative mechanism exposes the continuing authority of institutional mediation, revealing that testimony may survive while remaining vulnerable to reinterpretation, appropriation, or renewed subordination.

To address this argument, the article adopts a qualitative comparative design based on sustained close reading of two complete literary texts, privileging direct textual analysis over broad thematic generalization. Secondary scholarship serves to situate the discussion within ongoing theoretical debates rather than replacing primary textual interpretation. A detailed

account of the analytical procedures, corpus selection, and criteria guiding the comparative reading is presented in the following methodology section. The remainder of the article then develops the theoretical framework, examines each literary work individually, and concludes by demonstrating how the embedded historian functions as a flexible narrative mechanism whose epistemological implications vary according to the institutional conditions through which historical memory is constructed.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach because its primary objective was to interpret literary meaning through the systematic examination of narrative structures rather than to measure variables or test statistical relationships. As Espinoza Freire (2020a) argues, qualitative research seeks to understand complex phenomena within their natural contexts through analytical interpretation, making it particularly appropriate for studies that investigate cultural productions, symbolic representations, and textual meanings. From this perspective, the present research examined how the figure of the embedded historian operates as a narrative mechanism within two literary works and how this device shapes different representations of historical recovery.

The research followed a documentary design based on the critical examination of primary and secondary academic sources. Documentary research allows the researcher to construct a rigorous analytical framework through the systematic identification, selection, and interpretation of relevant scholarly literature. According to Espinoza Freire (2020b), the reliability of academic inquiry depends upon the careful search, evaluation, and integration of scientific information obtained from recognized academic databases and specialized publications. Consequently, the theoretical discussion developed in this study was supported by peer-reviewed scholarship on historiographic metafiction, feminist literary criticism, postcolonial studies, and historical memory.

The analytical strategy consisted of a comparative close reading of two complete literary texts: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Headstrong Historian* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. These works were selected intentionally because both explicitly incorporate an embedded historian within their narrative structure, allowing comparison of the same formal device under contrasting epistemological conditions. Rather than seeking statistical representativeness, purposive selection aimed to maximize analytical depth by examining texts in which historical mediation constitutes an explicit element of the narrative architecture.

The analysis was developed through successive stages of textual interpretation. First, each work was examined independently to identify narrative episodes in which historical testimony, archival reconstruction, or institutional mediation became central to the plot. Subsequently, similarities and differences were compared according to common analytical categories, including the institutional position of the embedded historian, the relationship between testimony and historical authority, the treatment of marginalized women's voices, and the epistemological implications of historical recovery. Throughout this process, scientific argumentation was constructed through the systematic integration of textual evidence and specialized scholarship, following the principles of coherent academic reasoning described by Espinoza-Freire (2021).

Finally, the study incorporated methodological reflexivity by explicitly recognizing that literary interpretation is shaped by theoretical assumptions and disciplinary positioning. As Espinoza Freire and Rad Camayd (2020) emphasize, ethical research requires transparency regarding the analytical decisions guiding interpretation. Accordingly, the selection of the corpus, the comparative categories, and the scope of the conclusions were defined explicitly to ensure methodological consistency and to delimit the interpretative reach of the findings.

Two Different Things Called "Popular"

Much of the existing literature on this topic uses "popular feminism" and "popular feminist literature" as though they named one phenomenon. They do not. Popular literature, as used here, is a claim about genre and circulation: a text reaches a mass readership through commercial publishing rather than academic or small-press circuits. Popular feminism, in Banet-Weiser's (2018) sense, is a claim about a political-economic formation: feminism repackaged as an individualized, marketable identity, often stripped of the structural critique that motivated it. A mass-market historical romance is popular literature. A slogan printed on merchandise is popular feminism. The two can overlap, but a novel can perform serious historical recovery as popular literature while having nothing to do with popular feminism as a market phenomenon, and popular feminism can circulate widely while producing no historical recovery at all. This article is concerned with the first sense throughout, naming the second explicitly wherever it becomes relevant, in Section 7.

Historiographic Metafiction and the Politics of the Archive

The device this article traces is not new to literary theory, and it would be a significant omission to present it as though it were. Hutcheon (1988) names it directly: historiographic metafiction is fiction that installs a self-conscious awareness of history as a human construct within its own narrative structure, frequently through a character or framing device that performs the act of historical writing on the page, thereby exposing rather than concealing the constructedness of the record the novel offers. This article's contribution is not the discovery of this device but its application to a specific comparative question Hutcheon's own framework does not resolve: does the device operate the same way when it is doing feminist recovery work as when it is doing the more general postmodern work of historiographic self-doubt that Hutcheon was primarily describing?

Spivak's (1988) argument about the structural difficulty of subaltern speech reaching representation at all, regardless of the sympathy of the writer attempting to represent it, sets the outer limit of what any answer to that question can claim. If the subaltern's speech cannot straightforwardly reach the archive even through a sympathetic intermediary, then an embedded fictional historian is, at best, a staged approximation of recovery, not recovery itself — a point this article takes seriously rather than treating as a formality to cite and move past. Agarwal's (2020) comparative study of Partition oral history projects reinforces the same caution empirically: even within explicitly feminist recovery projects, method determines what survives, and a novelist's chosen method is no exception to that rule.

It is worth asking directly, rather than assuming, whether either protagonist meets Spivak's own criterion, since the term is used loosely enough elsewhere in this field to have lost analytical force. Spivak's subaltern is defined structurally: a subject positioned outside the institutions — legal, educational, journalistic, historiographical — through which testimony is converted into recognized evidence, such that even a sympathetic act of representation on her behalf cannot make her speak in her own right within those institutions. Nwamgba fits this description closely: an illiterate Igbo woman under colonial rule, she has no access to the mission's schools, its written records, or its version of Christian and imperial history, and her only route into the record the story shows us is posthumous, through a granddaughter educated inside the very institutions that excluded her. Offred fits the term only partially, and the distinction matters. She is educated, English-speaking, and produces her own testimony in her own words; her exclusion is political and physical, enforced by Gilead's regime, rather than the deeper exclusion from the category of institutional speech itself that Spivak describes. What Pieixoto's condescension in Section 5 stages, then, is not quite the silencing of a subaltern in Spivak's strict sense, but something adjacent to it: the demonstration that even a woman who did speak fully, in her own voice, can still be re-subordinated by the institution that later decides how her speech is to be read. The two texts, on this distinction,

are not doing identical theoretical work, and treating "subaltern voice" as a single label for both would blur a difference the comparison depends on.

Close Reading I: Adichie's Embedded Historian as Redemption

Nwamgba, the protagonist of Adichie's story (2009, pp. 198–218), loses her husband early in the narrative and spends the following decades in conflict with a colonial mission that reshapes her family against her will: her son is sent to a missionary school, renamed, and gradually estranged from the language and religious practice she raised him in. Existing secondary treatment of this story (Yumnam & Laishram, 2025) reads this largely as content — a woman's private resistance to colonial patriarchy. What that reading underplays is the story's formal structure: its final movement (Adichie, 2009, pp. 214–218) shifts to Nwamgba's granddaughter, who reclaims an indigenous name, becomes a professional historian, and eventually writes the corrective historical account the story has just shown the reader being lived. The granddaughter is a textbook instance of Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction: a historian-within-the-fiction whose eventual book retroactively frames the preceding narrative as the record official colonial historiography failed to keep.

Structurally, this is a device of redemption. The story trusts its embedded historian. Nothing in the narrative undercuts the granddaughter's authority or suggests her account might itself distort what it recovers; the device closes the story on an note of restored continuity between a silenced grandmother and a professional descendant who can finally speak for her.

Close Reading II: Atwood's Embedded Historian as Doubt

The Handmaid's Tale ends not with Offred's own voice but with the "Historical Notes" (Atwood, 1985, pp. 299–311; pagination follows the McClelland and Stewart first edition and varies slightly across later printings), a mock academic transcript of a symposium in which a future scholar, Professor Pieixoto, presents and annotates the cassette-tape testimony that has constituted the novel's narrative. This is the same device examined in Section 4 — an embedded historian handling a woman's testimony — but Atwood inverts its function. This reading is not a private impression; it follows an established line in Atwood criticism. Ketterer (1989) reads Pieixoto's "prissy academic jokes" and the laughter they draw from his audience as evidence that the sexism structuring Gilead persists, in muted form, in the supposedly enlightened future that studies it. Grace (2001) goes further, arguing that the Historical Notes stage a documentary subversion in which the scholarly apparatus meant to authenticate Offred's testimony instead re-subordinates it, prioritizing questions of authorship and verification over the substance of what she survived. Malak (2004) reads the same epilogue as Atwood's deliberate refusal to let the novel's ending affirm progress in any simple sense.

Read against Adichie's story, this is the more theoretically significant finding of the two readings taken together. The same formal device Hutcheon identifies as characteristic of historiographic metafiction does not carry one fixed political valence. It can dramatize the successful recovery of a silenced woman's history, as in Adichie, or it can dramatize the very failure Spivak's argument anticipates: a testimony that reaches an audience only by passing through an intermediary who does not, in the end, take it seriously as evidence of a life rather than as an object of study. Atwood's ending, read through Ketterer, Grace, and Malak together, is a warning built into the genre itself against assuming that any embedded-historian device automatically performs the recovery work popular feminist criticism tends to credit it with.

Reading the Contrast Systematically: A Comparative Table

Sections 4 and 5 built the comparison through prose, one text at a time. Table 1 makes the same comparison visible at a glance, across the specific dimensions the argument depends on, so that the contrast between redemption and doubt is not left for the reader to reconstruct from two separate close readings.

Table 1.

Comparative structural analysis of the embedded-historian device in Adichie (2009) and Atwood (1985).

Dimension	Adichie, "The Headstrong Historian" (2009)	Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale, "Historical Notes" (1985)
Embedded-historian figure	Granddaughter (renamed Afamefuna), a professionally trained historian	Professor Pieixoto, a future academic presenting at a scholarly symposium
Relationship to the source testimony	Descendant recovering an ancestor's silenced life from inside the family	Outside academic institution studying a stranger's testimony as an artifact
Institutional position of the historian	Trained within, but ultimately writing against, colonial historiography	Fully inside a future academic establishment that never questions its own authority
Treatment of the woman's testimony	Restored to narrative center; her interior life is the story's subject	Rerouted through condescension; her suffering becomes secondary to source-verification
Valence toward historical recovery	Redemptive — the record is corrected and continuity restored	Doubting — the record is reprocessed and partly re-subordinated
Fit with Spivak's (1988) subaltern criterion	Close fit: excluded from the institutions that produce colonial record	Partial fit only: Offred speaks fully in her own voice; exclusion is political, not institutional
Theoretical implication (Section 3)	Hutcheon's (1988) device functions as intended: history rewritten from below	Same device exposes its own limit: recovery is staged, not guaranteed, by the fiction

Read across the table's rows rather than down its columns, the contribution of this article becomes precise rather than impressionistic: it is not that Adichie "recovers" and Atwood "fails to recover" in some general thematic sense, but that the same structural role — an embedded historian handling a woman's testimony — is filled by a descendant acting from inside a family in one text and by a detached institutional outsider in the other, and that this single structural difference is what generates the opposing valences recorded in row five. The Spivak row matters here specifically because it blocks a tempting overgeneralization: it would be easy to read the contrast as "Adichie's subaltern is recovered, Atwood's subaltern is not," but Offred does not meet Spivak's (1988) criterion as closely as Nwamgba does, so the table's own fourth-to-last row disciplines the claim in row five — Atwood's ending is a caution about institutional handling of testimony generally, not specifically a demonstration of subaltern silencing in Spivak's strict sense. Making this distinction visible in a table, rather than leaving it embedded in two long paragraphs, is intended to let a reader check the argument's logic directly against the textual evidence in Sections 4 and 5, row by row, rather than take the contrast on the strength of prose alone.

Comparative Extension: Scotland and Romance

Contemporary Scottish women's writing, as read by Bhattacharjee (2025) across authors including Liz Lochhead, Jackie Kay, and Ali Smith, pursues a comparable interest in reconstructing a national memory built around masculine narratives of rebellion, but by a different mechanism: displacement of scale onto domestic and private incident, rather than an embedded-historian figure of the kind examined directly above. Mass-market romance, on Philips's (2020) account, performs a different kind of correction again — restoring legitimacy to female desire and interiority as subjects worth narrating at length — without typically installing a historian character or reconstructing a specific silenced record at all. Neither of these two comparative cases was read directly for this article, a limitation restated below;

they are retained here only to mark, provisionally, that the Hutcheon device tested in Sections 4 and 5 does not appear to be the only mechanism by which popular feminist writing performs recovery, and may be closer to a special case than a general rule.

Limitations

Two texts were read directly; two others were read only through secondary scholarship, and claims about them are correspondingly provisional. The corpus is Anglophone and drawn from a literary tradition shaped by the author's own training, a positioning stated in Section 1 rather than treated as neutral. The comparison between Adichie and Atwood establishes that the same device can carry opposite valences in two texts; it does not establish how common either valence is across a larger corpus, nor whether the redemptive and the doubting versions of the device correlate with identifiable features of genre, authorial position, or period. Trans and non-binary experience, a gap already noted in the wider literature (Bhattacharjee, 2025), is absent from the two primary texts examined and from this article's own analysis.

Conclusion and Direction for Further Research

This exploratory study's main finding is a contrast, not a generalization: the historiographic-metafiction device Hutcheon (1988) describes appears in Adichie's story as an act of narrative redemption and in Atwood's novel as a staged failure of exactly the kind Spivak's (1988) argument would predict. Popular feminist fiction's relationship to historical recovery is, on this evidence, not a single settled achievement but an open argument the genre is still having with itself, sometimes within a single decade of writers working in the same broad tradition.

The concrete, falsifiable direction this suggests is a larger comparative study coding a substantial corpus of popular feminist fiction for the presence, absence, and valence (redemptive or doubting) of an embedded-historian device, tested against variables such as the author's proximity to the history being recovered, genre convention, and period of publication, to establish whether the redemption/doubt contrast identified here in two texts holds as a pattern or was simply the product of choosing Adichie and Atwood specifically.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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