



# Journal of Social and Political Sciences

**Çıkıkçı, K. (2026), Deconstructing the Gender Binary: A Butlerian Analysis of Gender Performativity in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. *Journal of Social and Political Sciences*, 9(1), 58-65.**

ISSN 2615-3718

DOI: 10.31014/aior.1991.09.01.615

The online version of this article can be found at:  
**<https://www.asianinstituteofresearch.org/>**

Published by:  
The Asian Institute of Research

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# Deconstructing the Gender Binary: A Butlerian Analysis of Gender Performativity in *The Left Hand of Darkness*

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## Abstract

Ursula K. Le Guin explores the fatal flaws of assigned gender roles and challenges heteronormative structures in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. She uses the science fiction genre to create a fictional world called Gethen in which the inhabitants are ambisexual and gender fluid life forms. Within this context, the human protagonist and the main narrator of the novel, Genly Ai, points out the complexities of Gethenian society. In this regard, Le Guin uses ambisexuality to underscore the implications of binary gender norms on society constructing a world excluding gender-based tension between men and women. According to that, *The Left Hand of Darkness* can be associated with almost all theories and assumptions in gender studies. Judith Butler's idea of gender performance perfectly goes parallel with the criticisms of Le Guin. This article revolves around the diverse discrimination and inequalities between gender roles.

**Keywords:** Ambivalence, Femininity, Gender Performativity, Gender Roles, Heteronormativity, Masculinity

## 1. Introduction

Since the beginning of civilization, gender roles defined by patriarchal organization which also caused inequality between genders, have been an undeniable factor in society. This complicated and deeply rooted social incident affected almost every culture and society by evolving over centuries. Defining gender roles is influenced by a variety of factors, especially religious, political, historical, or economic conditions. Origins of this complex phenomenon go back to ancient times when gender roles defined in terms of physical strength and reproductive roles. It can be said that some perceptions occurred based on gender roles which are related to biological conditions of men and women in terms of physical strength of men and on the other hand reproductive roles of women which have pushed them to claim domestic roles. With the rise of urbanization and the effects of the capitalist order, some changes in the economic structure have brought up gender issues within. The accumulation of wealth gave rise to a patriarchal structure in which men controlled both the domestic sphere and economic power. These economic changes made gender roles to evolve into another dimension and transformed into the social and political dominance of men. Furthermore, grand narratives such as religion may have been considered as one of the most influential determinants in the reinforcement of gender hierarchies. Interpretations and practices of religious texts and beliefs have led to unequal treatment of not only men and women but also otherized sexual orientations since

these narratives have also been shaped according to patriarchal structures of the society. Political systems have also put the women into a secondary position and taken their opportunities from women's suffrage to family laws and so on. Even feminist reforms could not entirely prevent those kinds of inequalities to continue today since politics still limit women's rights in most countries. These factors can be regarded as one of the most critical and focal points in the defining of gender roles throughout history.

Feminism as a movement has a very influential place in the literary field to criticize the relevant issues. This field explores social, cultural, psychological, or political boundaries between men and women, in this way, it delves beyond the biological facts and unfolds the ways in which society constructs the idea of gender and imposes expectations on men and women. In this approach, male and female as biological sexes are irrelevant to the ideas about masculinity and femininity. However, these ideas have been traditionally associated with sex that male must be related to masculinity and female must be related to femininity, otherwise you would not be accepted by the society. Butler challenges the binary sex by arguing that what we consider 'natural' is actually a cultural discourse. She deconstructs the traditional hierarchy between sex and gender by stating: "As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive," prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts." (Butler, 1990, p.11). Judith Butler's concept of performativity criticizes these expectations and deconstructs the conventional structures of gender roles by indicating that gender identity and expression are performative acts and gender is not a biological factor, but it is something that one performs. In this context, gender studies focus on almost every discriminative aspect of gender norms and provide a universal approach to gender figures. According to that, gender studies and feminist theories became a considerable approach in the literary field. Some influential writers, such as Virginia Woolf, Margaret Atwood, Alice Walker, or Mary Anne under the pen name of George Eliot have left impressive remarks on literature in terms of feminist and gender studies. Ursula K. Le Guin is one of these remarkable authors, with her outstanding science fiction novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* deconstructs the ideals of the heteronormative society by fictionalizing a planet in which the inhabitants of this environment have no biological binary genders. Heteronormativity as a term, refers to a sociocultural assumption in which a society claims heterosexuality as a defined sexual orientation and often alienates other sexual identities. In her article on Le Guin's work, Fayad explores the influence of heteronormative structure in the following passage:

Whether viewing gender as irreducible difference located in the body, or as a discursive construct, the argument has centered on a heterosexual norm that assumes a division between masculine and feminine identities, one that is specifically implicated in relations of power and domination. (Fayad, 1997, p59)

According to that, heteronormativity is an inevitable factor in patriarchal society that shapes the power dynamics between male and female and has an undeniable relation with assigning femininity and masculinity towards genders causing strict struggles to 'secondary' sexual orientations. At this point, the protagonist of the novel Genly Ai struggles to adapt himself into the ambisexual sociocultural structure of Gethen and criticizes it through the novel according to his own heteronormative point of view by trying to relate Gethenian people to femininity or masculinity. As a remarkable piece of art in literature, *The Left Hand of Darkness* can be analyzed in gender studies. There is a great variety of research on this science fiction novel including "*The Left Hand of Darkness*": *Feminism for Men* by Barrow and Barrow, *Aliens, Androgynes, and Anthropology: Le Guin's Critique of Representation in "The Left Hand of Darkness."* by Fayad. These articles help to form discussions on the relevant topic. Butler's evolutionary theory on gender studies suggesting that gender is a repetitive act of performance is used to compare and contrast the social structure of Gethen and gender expectations on Earth.

### 1.1. Understanding the Setting of the Novel

The setting of the novel takes place on a cold and icy fictional planet called Gethen. The very distinguishing characteristic of Gethenian people is their ambisexual life form and androgynous features. The term ambisexual is used to describe Gethenian people's sexual biological form in which they can perform both 'feminine' and 'masculine' sexual roles during their period of fertility called kemmer but they do not possess binary genders. On the other hand, the term androgyny refers to mixed gender expressions associated with both masculinity and

femininity. The function of androgyny in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is also stated in Fayad's research on this novel:

Androgyny, presumably inherent in one way or the other in all of us, functions as a third term that neutralizes the gendered way in which the subject is constructed. In this sense, androgyny can be seen as a space of resistance that redefines the ways in which gender identity is constructed. (Fayad, 1997, p.59)

Since their life form does not contain binary genders, there is no discrimination of femininity and masculinity in Gethenian's cultural structure as these ideas are results of defined gender roles in heteronormative society in which heterosexuality is the defined sexual orientation of a society. The fact that Gethenian people don't obtain different sexual orientations and don't claim gender roles defined by society due to their ambivalent biology, thus it becomes the supreme element of deconstructing the gender roles in our society by presenting a naturally gender fluid community in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Through this method, Ursula K. Le Guin deconstructs the societal expectations of our world in general and brings an illuminating perspective to unequal and discriminative perceptions towards binary gender roles, especially those who are living under the disillusionment of the heteronormative phenomenon. The reader observes the planet Gethen from the perspective of Genly Ai who is a human seeking for interstellar alliance of planets by making diplomatic contacts. As he is an outsider in Gethen and possesses an entirely different biological form compared to Gethenian people, he struggles to comprehend the genderfluid interrelationships of this society in terms of his patriarchal and heteronormative point of view. Fayad argues this point in her article as in the following lines.

It is mainly through the characterization of Genly Ai as a scientific observer that we see the cultural construction of gender in progress; far from being a "neutral" investigator, he translates the "neutral" sexual identity of the androgynes he encounters into assigned "masculine" and "feminine" roles. In this sense, Ai does more than classify the androgynes using categories that are not applicable; he unconsciously participates in the production of "masculine" and "feminine" identities. (Fayad, 1997, p.59)

In this regard, Genly Ai conflicts with his own constructed ideas of femininity and masculinity and tries to make a relation between his own heteronormative scope and Gethenian society in order to adapt to their culture. Within this context, Le Guin ignores and criticizes constructed gender roles by giving voice to a male character who tries to adapt to a gender fluid society. Moreover, Thibodeau considers *The Left Hand of Darkness* as not only a sci-fi narration that reverses gender roles, but also a radical thought experiment that makes it clear that gender is not an ontological feature but a socially constructed category. Centering around an androgynous alien species, the novel detaches the idea of gender from biological determinism and renders it as a temporary condition based on context, time and relationality. "The novel's use of an androgynous alien species not only explores gender as an essential element of social construction, but also imagines a world free of the male/female binary that so thoroughly dictates identity and informs discourse." (Thibodeau, 2012, p. 263). Thibodeau particularly underlines the male/female dichotomy which is pivotal to shape heteronormative discourse in such societies. Within this context, binary roles depend on cultural observations based on hierarchal constructions of gender. In this article, deconstruction of gender roles and heteronormative society from the perspective of Genly Ai in *The Left Hand of Darkness* will be analyzed.

## 2. Literature Review

Examining *The Left Hand of Darkness* within the framework of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* offers a critical review that helps readers explore the novel's essential themes such as gender performance, heteronormativity, androgyny and broken patriarchy. Reading this novel within the scope of Butler's gender theory makes the reader gain an extended understanding of the gender structure of modern world. There have been a lot of studies written about Le Guin's fictional world Gethen in terms of politics, postcolonialism, gender issues or racial ideologies in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. However, the idea that Le Guin, by depicting an androgynous society, aims not just to criticize gender roles but to expose the discursive inconsistency behind the marginalization of femininity by heteronormative society is not particularly vivid in most of the current studies of this novel. Hence, this article attempts to bring light to this very point in terms of Genly Ai's struggle to cope with Gethenian culture. While examining this study, Butler's *Gender Trouble* will serve as the primary source of the analysis.

### 3. Deconstruction of Binary Gender and Heteronormative Structure

Ursula K. Le Guin uses science fiction to construct a society in which there is no binary gender, either biologically or socially. As it is stated before, Le Guin narrates the experiences of Genly Ai who is an agent landed on the plated Gethen to provide diplomatic relations. The unusual characteristics of Gethenian people challenge Genly Ai's heteronormative values and make the readers question what gender norms actually mean.

From the very beginning of the story, the readers can encounter Genly Ai's confusion about how to define and mention Gethenian people. "Wiping sweat from his dark forehead the man-man I must say, having said he and his." (Le Guin, 1969, p.7). Since Gethenian people don't possess binary genders, the pronoun 'they/them' will be used to refer to them. He directly assigns gender identities to these people and subconsciously he chooses to call him 'man' to identify 'their' presence. In Genly Ai's point of view it can be suggested that the reason why he prefers to classify 'them' as a male can be associated with power dynamics of gender in which masculinity is often considered dominant over femininity. Genly Ai reveals his irritation towards 'their' effeminate tone of actions. "Annoyed by this sense of effeminate intrigue I got off the platform." (Le Guin, 1969, p.8) Herein, it can be observed that Genly Ai criticizes the attitudes of Gethenians according to his own perception of gender and assigns gender roles to these people once again. The reason why he gets irritated by the femininity of that individual can be associated with fixed gender norms of heteronormative cultural structure of Genly Ai. He mostly considers Gethenian people as male and associates them with masculinity. In this regard the feminine attitudes of the Gethenian do not fit with the expectations of Genly Ai who mostly represents the conventional heteronormative society in this novel. This point is also discussed in an article by Craig and Diana Barrow.

"The role of Genly Ai, however, is not to reinforce stereotypical male attitudes but to expose them; he is the means whereby men can confront their own ambiguous responses to women through the cultural shock of seeing feminine qualities in Gethenians that Genly Ai unconsciously perceives as male." (Barrow & Barrow, 1987, p.85)

Associated with that, Genly Ai's perspective goes parallel with what Butler tries to explain. According to Butler, there is a particular difference between gender and sex. She claims that sex is a biological fact that defines people's productive roles and anatomical differences between male and female sex. On the other hand, gender refers to the societal expectations from male and female regarding man and woman. However, those expectations could be cruel that society expects male to be man and female to be woman, in other words, a male must perform masculinity, and a female must perform femininity. By contrast with the expectations of society, Butler claims that one should be free to perform whoever he or she wants to be, hence there is no ultimate association between male one and masculinity or female one and femininity since gender is a fluid phenomenon (Butler, 1999, p. 10). These expectations of gender performance bring confusion to Genly Ai as can be seen in the following lines. Within this context, Rudy's observation (1997) directly aligns with Butler's argument about gender fluidity. By describing gender as a 'social grid' rather than a 'biological certainty' Rudy highlights that being a 'man' or a 'woman' is a behavior which is learned from the dictation of social structures (p. 33). Genly Ai's struggle to understand Gethen's biological order incomparably illustrates the 'social grid' that Rudy draws attention. He cannot succeed in ignoring the binary conditioning of his own reality.

Though I had been nearly two years on Winter I was still far from being able to see the people of the planet through their own eyes. I tried to, but my efforts took the form of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first as a man, then as a woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to my own. (Le Guin, 1969, p 10)

Genly Ai reveals his confusion about Gethenian life form, and he fails to understand and empathize with their natural genderless identity. Indicating that he spent two years and still cannot fit into the cultural formation of Gethen emphasizes the inevitable construction of unequal binary gender-based society. However, gender categories which are "essential" to Genly Ai are completely irrelevant in establishing social interactions.

I thought that at table Estraven's performance had been womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit. Was it in fact perhaps this soft supple femininity that I disliked and distrusted in him? For it was impossible to think of him as a woman, that dark, ironic, powerful presence near me in

the firelit darkness, and yet whenever I thought of him as a man I felt a sense of falseness, of imposture: in him. (Le Guin, 1969, p10)

In this excerpt, Genly Ai's discomfort with femininity draws attention. It is noteworthy to state that his way of associating femininity with mischievous attitudes is highly related to misconception towards conventional otherization of womanhood and femininity. Genly Ai's internal conflict forces him to categorize Estraven in terms of binary genders due to defined gender roles in his culture. He relies on stereotypical gender norms of femininity and tries to apply those norms to Gethenian cultural structure.

In chapter three, there is a moment when the king and other Gethenians are talking about the other life forms which have biologically binary genders, the king states that "So all of them, out on these other planets, are in permanent kemmer? A society of perverts? (Le Guin, 1969, p21). As was stated before, kemmer is a periodic cycle of Gethenians when they obtain productive roles. They only obtain these roles during their coupling. This part can be interpreted as an ironic representation of homophobia. Thereby, Le Guin mocks the established ideas on gender and societal norms. In heteronormative societies, sexual orientations can be regarded as 'perversion' just as the king labels people who are in permanent kemmer (obtaining one gender role permanently) as a society of perverts. Herein, Le Guin subverts the overall misperception of sexual expectations and orientations.

Ursula K. Le Guin points out gender discriminative attitudes of human culture by adapting homophobia into the sociocultural expectations of Gethenian people. In human culture obtaining reverse gender roles compared to assigned roles to biological sexes is an inappropriate action to take. In this regard, Le Guin criticizes this point through social expectations of Gethenian people.

Excessive prolongation of the kemmer period, with permanent hormonal imbalance toward the male or the female, causes what they call perversion; it is not rare; three or four percent of adults may be physiological perverts or abnormals-normals, by our standard. They are not excluded from society, but they are tolerated with some disdain, as homosexuals are in many bisexual societies. The Karhidish slang for them is halfdeads. They are sterile. (Le Guin, 1969, p.34)

In Gethen, people must only obtain fixed roles during their productive cycle, and it is an abnormal situation to obtain permanent roles out of kemmer. This potential flaw in Gethenian culture is similar to the concept of homophobia in human culture and can be associated with "heterophobia" when it comes to applying homophobia in Gethen culture. In other words, homophobia is a reflection against having an affair with the same sex, and in order to make a relation with human culture, it can be regarded as heterophobia in Gethenian culture since it is not appropriate to obtain permanent productive role in Gethen.

In chapter five, there is a part where Genly Ai describes his host. "My landlady, a voluble man, arranged my journey into the East." (Le Guin, 1969, p 26) He chooses to use the word "landlady" indicating his host is a female and on the other hand he refers to 'them' as a man. This part is a very strong representation of Genly Ai's confusion about their fluid gender. Then he continues to reveal why he chooses to use these words by saying "I thought of him as my landlady, for he had fat buttocks that wagged as he walked, and a soft fat face, and a prying, spying, ignoble, kindly nature." (Le Guin, 1969, p27). It is observable that Genly Ai associates such terms as kindness, ignobility, and prying with femininity, which puts 'them' in a secondary position compared to masculinity by insulting the qualities of femininity in a sexist manner. In the same manner, he associates certain physical features with gender as well. On the other hand, when it is observed from a perspective of binary gender, parental roles of Gethenian people can be confusing considering their ambivalent nature in regard to motherhood and fatherhood since they can both give birth and fertilize their partner. At this point, Genly Ai states that he asked his 'landlady' how many children 'they' gave birth to:

He was so feminine in looks and manner that I once asked him how many children he had. He looked glum. He had never borne any. He had, however, sired four. It was one of the little jolts I was always getting. Cultural shock was nothing much compared to the biological shock I suffered as a human male among human beings who were, five-sixths of the time, hermaphroditic neuters. (Le Guin, 1969, p27)

When the readers focus on the response of Genly Ai to his so called “landlady”, it turns out that ‘they’ have not given birth before but sired four children. If the readers examine this very point in terms of binary gender roles, it can be seen that the “landlady” is a ‘father’ of four children even though ‘they’ are considered and described as feminine with ‘their’ physical and characteristic features. When parental figures in binary gender societies are taken into account, there could be a relationship of superiority and inferiority between fatherhood and motherhood figures in terms of the binary oppositions of power dynamics in gender structures. In this regard, Genly Ai gets shocked, and his gender expectations get shaken when he hears that the “landlady” he overlooked by feminizing ‘them’ has obtained the role of “fatherhood” according to Genly’s cultural background. At this point Le Guin highlights the fluidity of gender once again. Another concept of masculinity is associated with “war”. Genly Ai points out that there had been no massacre or genocide in Gethen before:

But on Gethen nothing led to war. Quarrels, murders, feuds, forays, vendettas, assassinations, tortures and abominations, all these were in their repertory of human accomplishments; but they did not go to war. They lacked, it seemed, the capacity to mobilize. They behaved like animals, in that respect, or like women. They did not behave like men, or ants. (Le Guin, 1969, p.27)

He puts boundaries between the terms war and femininity. In this context, he places the term of war in the same category with masculinity and associates the fact that Gethenian people have never had a global war with their gender fluidity and makes a connection with their “femininity” in terms of his heteronormative culture structure. In this part the readers can observe that Genly Ai prioritizes masculinity and puts Gethenian people in a secondary position by feminizing them.

Ultimately, Le Guin’s fictional planet Gethen is not very different from the world we know and live today in terms of rejecting the sexual orientations which do not appeal to the conformist society; however, it is also an incredible tool to criticize the established binary gender roles by presenting a society where ‘sex’ is not a fixed biological phenomenon. By doing so, Le Guin deconstructs the heterosexual matrix which claims people are only perceivable as individuals if they fit into the binary relation of male masculinity and female femininity.

#### 4. Flaws of the Binary Gender Roles

As it is also stated in the title of chapter seven, *The Question of Sex*, unravels the sexual characteristics of Gethenian people. The narration shifts from the perspective of Genly Ai to first researcher crew that landed on Gethen. The readers get to know about their gender structures and how they affected their culture. Firstly, the biological functioning of Gethenians, as detailed in this passage and as it is mentioned in the previous chapter of this article, the representation of Gethenian’s sexual relations are stated in the following lines by the research crew landed on the planet as “The genitals engorge or shrink accordingly, foreplay intensifies, and the partner, triggered by the change, takes on the other sexual role (? without exception? If there are exceptions, resulting in kemmer-partners of the same sex, they are so rare as to be ignored).” (Le Guin, 1969, p.47). They have difficulties in understanding the sexual orientation of Gethenians since the crew’s understanding of sexuality is centered around binary genders. The observer’s use of question marks and the dismissal of varieties of other sexual pairings such as same-sex intercourses that can be categorized as homosexual pairings in gender binary culture of the observer and Genly Ai as well reveals a heteronormative gaze. Within this context, even the most intellectual minds of the Ekumen struggle to describe Gethenian sexuality without reflecting their own binary understanding of Gethen’s fluid system. On the other hand, they can choose which productive role they would obtain via hormone medicines. “(Otie Nim wrote that in the Orgoreyn region the use of hormone derivatives to establish a preferred sexuality is quite common; I haven’t seen this done in rural Karhide.)” (p.48). Their chance to choose productive roles can be associated with gender fluidity of Gethenians. Moreover, parental structure is given in the following line. “Descent of course is reckoned, all over Gethen, from the mother, the “parent in the flesh” (Karh.amha)” (p.48). When this part is considered, Gethenian people apply ‘matriarchal’ descent as an indirect criticism of patriarchal descent. However, it can be observed that “motherhood” is only biologically concerned and has nothing to do with societal expectations and established gender performance since Gethenians can obtain both productive roles. The mention of hormone in Orgoreyn suggests that gender is not only a biological occurrence on Gethen but also it can be a subjective preference. This demonstrates that there is still a potential for gender performance or biological choice even if their androgynous nature; however, this performance is disassociated with motherhood from the domestic

sphere. In Gethen any leader, physician, or laborer can become a ‘mother’ apart from its traditional submissiveness and becomes a symbol of biological capability. Furthermore, the most striking critical part of the novel might be the following lines since they are direct comparisons of Gethenian and human cultures:

Consider: Anyone can turn his hand to anything. This sounds very simple, but its psychological effects are incalculable. The fact that everyone between seventeen and thirty-five or so is liable to be (as Nim put it) "tied down to childbearing," implies that no one is quite so thoroughly "tied down" here as women, elsewhere, are likely to be—psychologically or physically. Burden and privilege are shared out pretty equally; everybody has the same risk to run or choice to make. Therefore, nobody here is quite so free as a free male anywhere else. [...] Consider: There is no unconsenting sex, no rape. As with most mammals other than man, coitus can be performed only by mutual invitation and consent; otherwise, it is not possible. Seduction certainly is possible, but it must have to be awfully well timed. [...] Consider: There is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves, protective/protected, dominant/submissive, owner/chattel, active/passive. In fact the whole tendency to dualism that pervades human thinking may be found to be lessened, or changed, on Winter. (Le Guin, 1969, p.49)

This passage serves as a fundamental criticism of patriarchal order and completely argues and uncovers the flaws of gender discrimination. Le Guin argues the inherent flaws of gender divided society by demonstrating a world where the ‘burden’ of bearing a child or ‘privilege’ of ability to fertilize are shared out equally. This equality deconstructs the conventional ideology of dominant/submissive or active/passive dichotomies that set human patriarchy. Moreover, this section encapsulates the focal point of this paper which is the social struggles imposed on women and queer society within patriarchal hierarchy. Through the perspective of Gethenian gender fluidity, Le Guin uncovers how the social destruction caused by gender discrimination in human culture is based on these binaries advocating for a social structure that values mutual consent and equally shared human experience over hierarchical dominance.

## 5. Conclusion

In short, Le Guin criticizes binary oppositions of gender roles, patriarchy, suppression of women and queer society, inequality between genders and every other discriminative and discriminated aspect of binary gender through science fiction and applies these figures through a gender fluid ambivalent life form, Gethenians. The conventional link between biological sex and social roles has been challenged in the novel. Le Guin suggests that many of the traits that have been considered ‘natural’ are fixed cultural constructions. These points are unfolded by Genly Ai’s scope in order to highlight the limitations of binary worldview. All those points mock the heteronormative perception of male dominated society in the perspective of Genly Ai. Butler’s idea of gender as a performative construction can be observed in every detail of *The Left Hand of Darkness*. In this remarkable work, one can question the destructive social construction of male dominated society.

**Funding:** Not applicable.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Informed Consent Statement/Ethics Approval:** Not applicable.

**Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies:** This study has not used any generative AI tools or technologies in the preparation of this manuscript.

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