

"Independent Drawings": A Study of Single-Leaf Drawing in the Safavid, Mughal, and Ottoman Courts

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Abstract: Persian Negārgarī comprises a rich variety of paintings and drawings that have survived from different historical periods. During the Safavid period, under sustained courtly patronage, these pictorial traditions underwent remarkable stylistic and thematic diversification, leading to the emergence of an autonomous artistic current. Within this context, single-leaf works executed in the *qalam-siyāh* style came to be regarded as self-contained Independent Drawings, developing alongside manuscript painting as a distinct artistic medium. The continuation of this tradition gave rise to a new current within Persian Negārgarī that also acquired a transregional dimension. During the Safavid period, the Mughal and Ottoman courts showed particular interest in Persian single-leaf drawings, and the tradition was subsequently adopted and further developed in both artistic centers. This study addresses two principal questions: Which single-leaf drawings may legitimately be regarded as Independent Drawings, and through what processes did Independent Drawing emerge and develop within the Safavid, Mughal, and Ottoman courts? The study employs a descriptive-comparative approach based on documentary sources and digital museum collections. The findings indicate that the term Independent Drawing applies only to drawings that demonstrate autonomy with respect to medium, style, subject matter, and mode of presentation. In the Safavid court, Independent Drawing evolved from an artistic phenomenon into a distinct artistic movement characterized by innovative subject matter. It was subsequently transmitted to Mughal India through the temporary residence of the Mughal emperors in Iran, the presence of Iranian artists at the Mughal court, the exchange of Independent Drawings as diplomatic gifts, and their commercial circulation, developments that also contributed to the emergence of the Nim-qalam style. In the Ottoman court, by contrast, despite the presence of Iranian artists, the influence of Independent Drawing remained largely confined to its formal characteristics and did not develop into a sustained artistic movement.

Keywords:

Independent Drawing
Single-Leaf Drawing
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1. Introduction

Persian Negārgarī comprises a rich and extensive body of both paintings and drawings. Although drawings constitute an important part of this artistic tradition, they have attracted far less scholarly attention than paintings. Commonly known as *qalam-siyāh*, these works are monochrome images executed in dark ink on a light ground. Most *qalam-siyāh* works were created as single-sheet compositions in which drawing served as a finished work of art rather than as a preparatory stage for painting. In light of these characteristics, the present study refers to this category of works as Independent Drawing. Independent Drawing may be understood from two complementary perspectives. On the one hand, it represents an artistic phenomenon defined by the autonomous status of drawing as a finished medium. On the other, it may be regarded as an artistic movement that emerged through the continuous development of single-sheet drawings during the Safavid period. Together, these two dimensions contributed to the recognition of Independent Drawing

within the Safavid court and supported its subsequent transmission, through political and cultural exchange, to both the Mughal and Ottoman courts.

Against this background, the present study seeks to clarify the nature of Independent Drawing and to examine the circumstances surrounding its emergence and dissemination. It therefore addresses two principal questions: (1) Which single-sheet drawings may legitimately be classified as Independent Drawings? and (2) How did Independent Drawing emerge and develop within the Safavid Persian, Mughal, and Ottoman courts? Answering these questions highlights the need for more specialized studies devoted to drawing within Persian *Negārgarī*. Just as Safavid artists clearly distinguished drawing from painting in their artistic practice, scholarly research should likewise recognize drawing as an independent field of inquiry within the history of Persian *Negārgarī*.

2. Research Methodology

This study adopts a historical approach based on the historical-comparative method. By interpreting historical evidence within its broader cultural and historical contexts, this method enables the comparative analysis of artistic developments across different societies and periods. According to established research typologies, it encompasses eighteen methodological categories, of which the present study corresponds to the fifth, focusing on qualitative cross-cultural historical data. Chronologically, the research examines the period from the sixteenth century CE (tenth century AH) to the late seventeenth century CE (eleventh century AH), a time that coincides with the flourishing of Independent Drawing in the Safavid, Mughal, and Ottoman courts. Documentary sources were collected through library research, while visual materials were gathered from museum collections and official museum websites. Given the qualitative nature of the study, the illustrated examples were selected through purposive sampling, with preference given to works that most clearly represent the defining characteristics of Independent Drawing.

3. Drawing and the Concept of Independence

In Persian, the term *drawing* has traditionally been associated with concepts such as foundation, outline, and the preliminary delineation of form (Dehkhodā, 1998, Vol. 10: 15411). Within Persian *Negārgarī*, drawing is a mode of visual representation that relies primarily on the expressive potential of line and may serve either as a preliminary sketch or as an autonomous work of art (Pākbāz, 2006b: 348). Safavid textual sources most commonly refer to this practice as *qalam-siyāh*, a technique in which monochrome dark lines are executed on a light ground. Through subtle variations in line weight, density, and tonal value, the artist creates a wide range of visual effects that respond to both the formal structure and the expressive character of the subject. The defining feature of drawing in Persian *Negārgarī*, therefore, lies in the primacy of line. Once chromatic modelling assumes the primary role in constructing pictorial space or distinguishing visual forms, the work no longer functions as drawing but instead belongs to the domain of painting (Swietochowski & Babaie, 1989). Beyond its formal role, line in Persian *Negārgarī* possesses both representational and expressive qualities. It functions not only as an iconographic device but also as a visual language capable of conveying the artist's intention and the latent meanings embedded within the image (Balafrej, 2019: 19). From this perspective, drawing may be defined as the monochrome representation of visible forms and mental or physical concepts through line, in which line serves as both the principal structural element and the primary vehicle of meaning. The term Independent derives from the concept of autonomy or self-sufficiency (Dehkhodā, 1998, Vol. 13: 20833). When applied to drawing, it refers to works that are autonomous in four fundamental respects: medium, style, subject matter, and mode of presentation. Independent Drawings achieve visual completeness through line alone, without relying on colour. As an artistic medium, they communicate meaning exclusively through the *qalam-siyāh* technique. Their autonomy also extends to subject matter, having become independent of literary narratives and illustrated manuscripts. Rather than forming part of a sequential manuscript cycle, each Independent

Drawing presents a self-contained visual statement on a single sheet, establishing its own autonomous narrative (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. A Dervish Carrying a Bowl of Milk, Isfahan, 11th Century AH ([URL 1](#)).

4. Independent Drawing in the Safavid Court

Independent Drawing in Persian Negārgarī developed through three successive stages: emergence, continuity, and culmination. Its earliest manifestations can be traced to astronomical manuscripts, particularly the illustrated *Šuwar al-Kawākib al-Thābitah* by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Šūfī during the Buyid period. The tradition continued in the Jalayirid era with the drawings of the *Dīvān* of Sulṭān Aḥmad Jalayir. It was in Timurid Herat, however, under Kamāl al-Dīn Bihzād, that Independent Drawing achieved genuine continuity. His works represent the earliest surviving examples that exhibit all the defining characteristics of Independent Drawing, most importantly their complete independence from literary texts and manuscript illustration. Bihzād may therefore be regarded as the pioneer of single-sheet drawings depicting scenes from the everyday lives of ordinary people, subjects that had previously occupied only a marginal place within Persian Negārgarī ([Āzhand, 2008: 388](#)).

During the Safavid period, this artistic current gained official recognition through Muḥammadī Haravī. Although he participated in the illustration of manuscripts such as *Guy u Chawgān* of Shah Ṭahmāsp and Jāmī’s *Haft Awrang* ([Sudāvar, 2004: 151](#)), he is best known for his monochrome Independent Drawings portraying villagers and dervishes. While building upon Bihzād’s artistic legacy, Muḥammadī established a new artistic direction that was later developed by Šādiqī Beg in the Qazvin School and Reżā ‘Abbāsī in the Isfahan School ([Kühnel, 2014: 119](#)). During this period, Independent Drawing evolved into an autonomous artistic medium characterized by monochrome, single-sheet compositions that typically depict a single figure ([Fig. 2](#)).

Unified by their reliance on the *qalam-siyāh* technique, these works shifted their thematic emphasis from courtly subjects toward ordinary people, artisans, dervishes, and other marginalized social groups. Drawing on his close familiarity with different strata of society, Šādiqī Beg portrayed figures such as lion tamers in independent compositions ([Fig. 3](#)), further reinforcing

the autonomy of Independent Drawing from literary narratives and courtly conventions ([Munshī, 1314 AH, Vol. 1: 128](#)). The following Figure summarizes this developmental trajectory ([Fig. 4](#)).

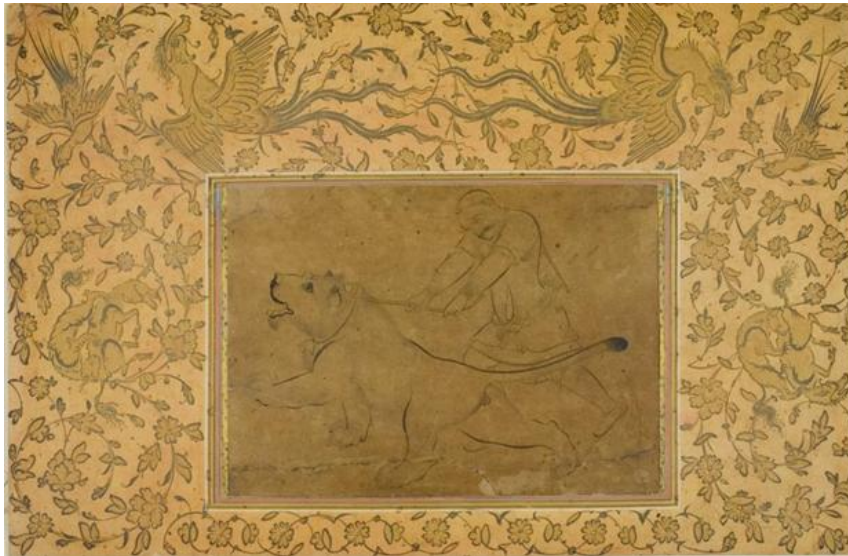


Figure 2. Lion Tamer, Šādiqī Beg, Qazvin, 11th Century AH ([Khazā'ī, 2019: 710](#)).



Figure 3. Wrestler, Režā 'Abbāsī, Isfahan, 11th Century AH ([Khazā'ī, 2019: 713](#)).

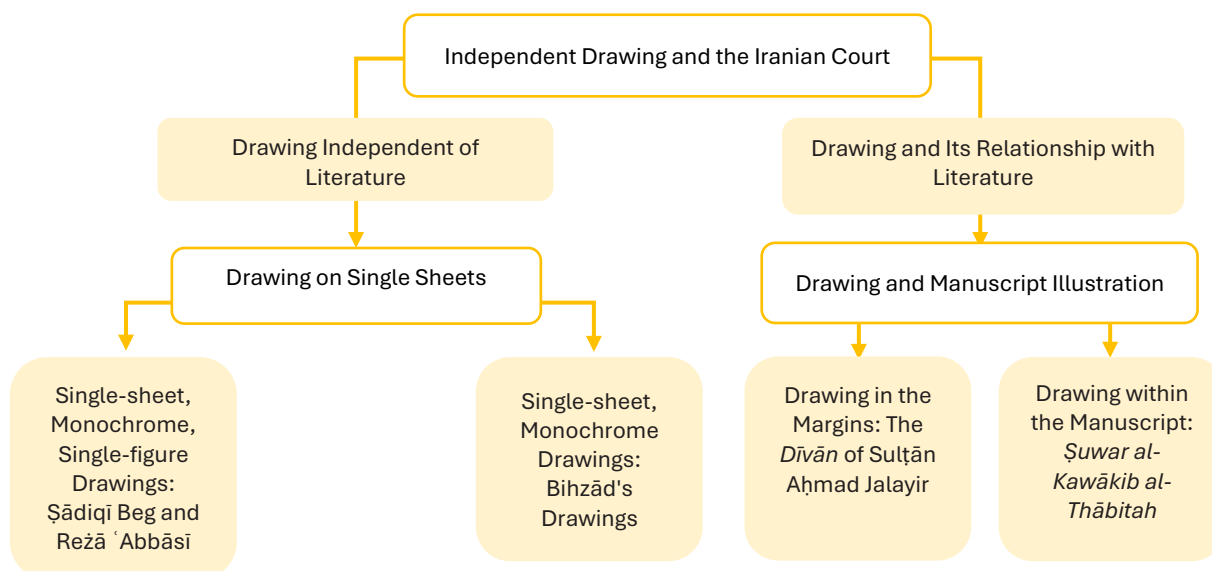


Figure 4: Independent Drawing at the Ottoman Court and Its Influence (Author).

5. Independent Drawing in the Mughal Court

The influence of Herat *Negārgarī* extended beyond Iran through Ẓahīr al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur's encounter with Timurid artistic traditions. This process intensified under Humāyūn, who requested that Shah Ṭahmāsp I dispatch Mīr Sayyid ʿAlī and Khwāja ʿAbd al-Šamad to the Mughal court (Navāʾī, 1978, Vol. 3: 296). In addition, Shah Ṭahmāsp presented Humāyūn with several monochrome independent drawings by Dust Muḥammad, Mīr Sayyid ʿAlī, ʿAbd al-Šamad, Darvīsh Muḥammad, and Yūsuf (Bayāt, 2003: 69). Unlike the customary diplomatic exchange of richly illustrated manuscripts, these gifts demonstrate that independent drawings had themselves acquired the status of prestigious courtly objects. With Mīr Sayyid ʿAlī's arrival at Akbar's court, independent drawing became institutionally established within Mughal *Negārgarī*. He transmitted Bihzād's pictorial principles, including panoramic composition that accommodated figures from all social classes (Pākbāz, 2006a: 557), while simultaneously introducing the tradition of monochrome, single-sheet, single-figure drawings into India.

The continued development of this tradition transformed independent drawings into both artistic and commercial commodities, as evidenced by Šādiqī Beg's account of Indian merchants purchasing his monochrome drawings (Naṣrābādī, 1938: 39–40). This growing appreciation ultimately contributed to the emergence of the *Nim-qalam* style during Akbar's reign (Welch, 1945: 42). Closely related to the Safavid *qalam-siyāh* tradition in its emphasis on line, single-sheet format, and single-figure compositions (Rezapour Moqaddam & Āzhand, 2025: 14), this style also reflected Akbar's own artistic training in Iran (Craven, 2009: 221). Consequently, Mughal artists such as Basāwan and Mukund increasingly produced *Nim-qalam* drawings depicting solitary figures, particularly dervishes and other non-courtly individuals (Fig. 5 & Fig. 6).

Although their handling of line lacked the expressive modulation characteristic of Safavid drawings, independent drawing fundamentally transformed Mughal subject matter by introducing artisans, elephant keepers, qalandars, dervishes, itinerant musicians, and other ordinary people into imperial ateliers (Schimmel, 2017: 334; Coomaraswamy, 2003: 183). Under Jahāngīr, this descriptive approach continued to flourish with sustained imperial patronage. The following diagram provides a schematic overview of this development (Fig. 7).



Figure 5. Qalandar, Independent Drawing, Basāwan, Akbar's Imperial Atelier, Late 10th Century AH ([URL 2](#)).



Figure 6. Qalandar, Independent Drawing, Mukund, Akbar's Imperial Atelier, Late 10th Century AH ([URL 3](#)).

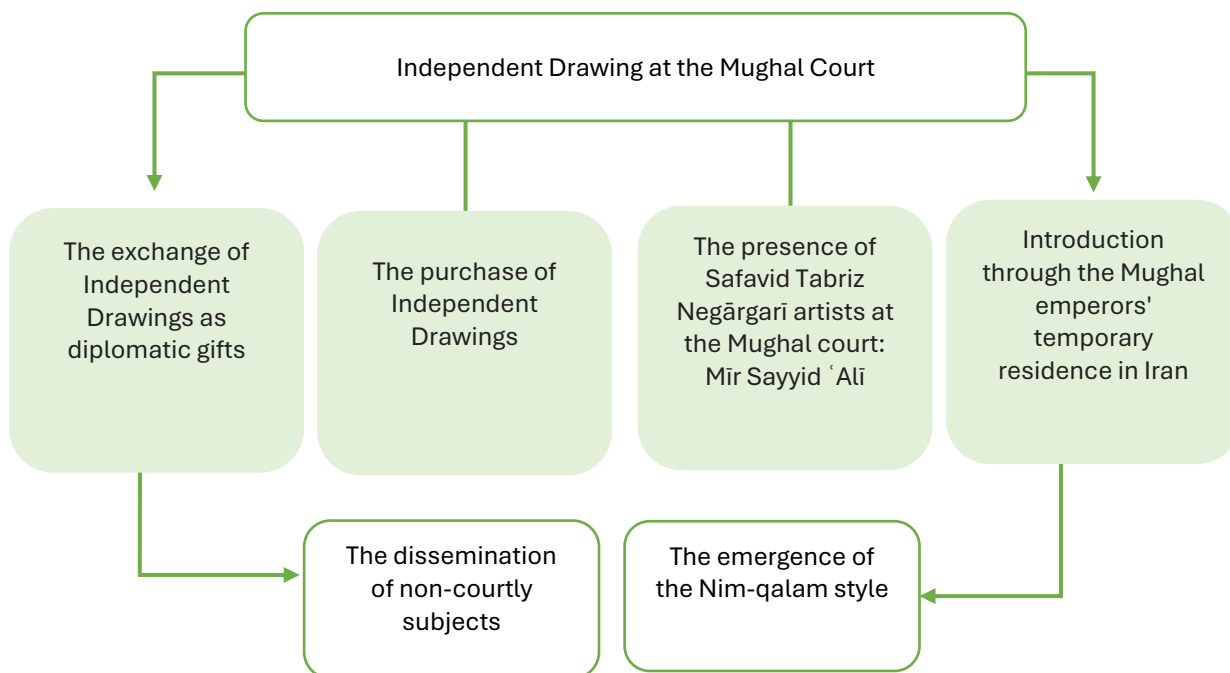


Figure 7. Independent Drawing at the Mughal Court and Its Influence (Author).

6. Independent Drawing in the Ottoman Court

Another major sphere of influence for Safavid independent drawing was the Ottoman court. Despite political and religious rivalries, artistic exchange developed through the relocation of Iranian artists. Following the Battle of Chaldiran, Sultan Selim I transferred numerous Persian artists and manuscripts to Istanbul ([Āzhand, 2013, Vol. 2: 668](#)). Among them, Shāh Qulī and Valī Jān played a decisive role in transmitting the Iranian tradition of independent drawing. Trained in the Tabriz School under Āqā Mirak, Shāh Qulī became one of the foremost masters of Ottoman *Negārgarī* and introduced the Saz style (['Ālī Efendī, 2020: 147](#)). Although derived from earlier *khaṭā'ī* vegetal motifs, the Saz style transformed these ornamental elements into autonomous monochrome ([Fig. 8](#)), single-sheet drawings, thereby achieving the characteristics of independent drawing ([Amīr Rāshid & Hoseynī, 2015: 16–17](#)).



Figure 8. Independent Drawing Combining *khaṭā'ī* Motifs and the Saz Style, Shāh Qulī ([URL 4](#)).

Shāh Qulī also created numerous monochrome drawings of angels whose emphasis on line, monochrome execution, and isolated figures reflects the legacy of the Tabriz and Qazvin Schools while incorporating Ottoman costume (Binney, 1973: 52). This tradition was continued by Valī Jān, a pupil of Siyāvush Beg, who had already practiced *qalam-siyāh* drawing before immigrating to Istanbul. In the Ottoman court, he produced both Saz drawings and independent single-sheet representations of angels, fairy-like figures, and women (Fig. 9), thereby extending the single-sheet tradition of the Tabriz and Qazvin Schools (‘Ālī Efendī, 2020: 150; Āzhand, 2019: 48).

The visual similarity between his female figures and angels, distinguished primarily by the presence of wings, has led scholars to interpret these works as idealized women represented in angelic form (Karīmzādeh Tabrizī, 1991, Vol. 3: 1405). Unlike the Safavid and Mughal traditions, however, Ottoman independent drawing remained largely confined to vegetal motifs, angels, and a limited number of isolated human figures. Subjects drawn from everyday life and non-courtly society, which constituted a defining feature of Safavid and Mughal independent drawing, were largely absent. Consequently, the influence of Persian independent drawing in the Ottoman context remained phenomenal rather than developmental: it did not evolve into a sustained artistic movement and effectively concluded with the works of Shāh Qulī and Valī Jān. This process is schematically represented in the figure below (Fig. 10).



Figure 9. Angel, Valī Jān Ottoman Late 10th Century AH ([URL 5](#)).

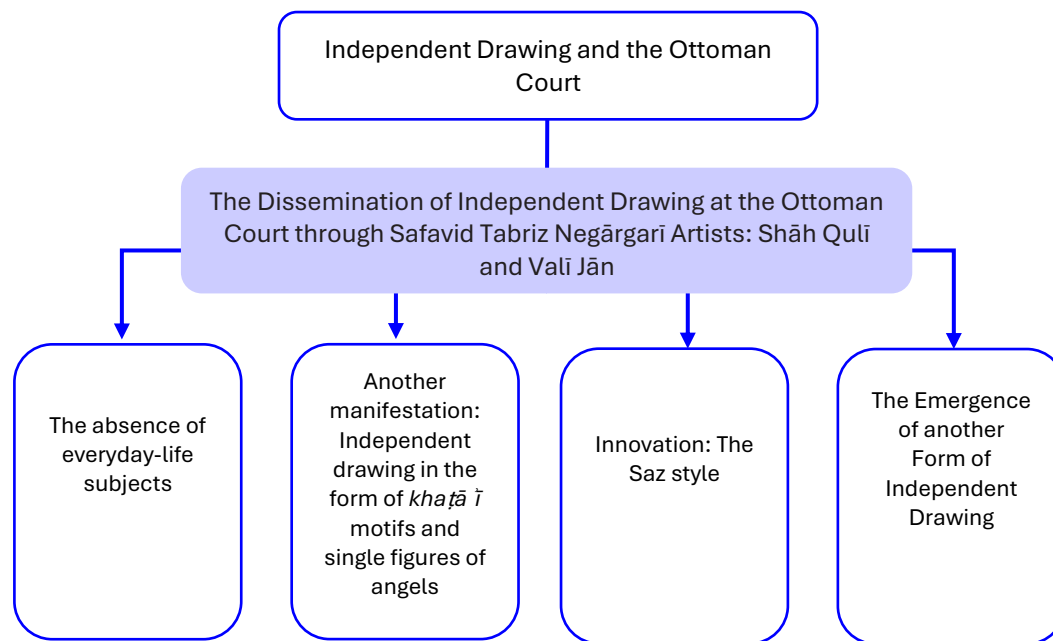


Figure 10. Independent Drawing at the Ottoman Court and Its Influence (Author).

7. Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that drawing is the monochrome representation of visual forms and mental or physical concepts through line, in which line functions not merely as a formal element but also as the primary vehicle of meaning. Nevertheless, only those drawings that exhibit autonomy in terms of medium, style, subject matter, and mode of presentation can be defined as independent drawings. Such works are neither preparatory studies for paintings nor components of illustrated manuscripts; rather, they constitute an autonomous medium whose visual narratives rely exclusively on line and are presented as independent single-sheet works. As the heir to the Timurid tradition, Safavid *Negārgarī* transformed independent drawing into a distinct artistic current parallel to manuscript painting. From the Tabriz to the Isfahan School, it progressively shifted toward the representation of non-courtly subjects. Muḥammadī Haravī introduced scenes from rural daily life; Şādiqī Beg established the single-sheet, monochrome, single-figure format; and Reżā‘Abbāsī brought this tradition to its artistic culmination.

The diffusion of this tradition to Mughal India resulted from four interconnected factors: the residence of Bābur and Humāyūn in Iran, the presence of Mīr Sayyid ‘Alī at the Mughal court, the exchange of independent drawings as diplomatic gifts, and the commercial circulation of these works. These developments fostered the emergence of Nim-qalam drawings and broadened the representation of elephant keepers, dervishes, qalandars, itinerant musicians, and other non-courtly figures. Consequently, independent drawing functioned in Mughal India not merely as an artistic phenomenon but as a transformative artistic movement. In contrast, the Ottoman reception of independent drawing remained limited. It was largely confined to the works of Shāh Qulī and Valī Jān, to subjects such as angels and idealized youths, and to the development of the Saz style devoted to *khaṭā’ī* vegetal motifs. Therefore, whereas independent drawing became a sustained artistic movement in Mughal *Negārgarī*, its Ottoman counterpart remained primarily an isolated artistic phenomenon. These findings provide a foundation for future investigations into the continuation of independent drawing within the contemporary *Negārgarī* traditions of Iran, India, and Türkiye.

Conflict of Interest

This article was authored by a single researcher and involves no conflict of interest.

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Access to Materials and Data

The data of this research will be accessible through correspondence with the author.

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