

Sacred Flames in Text: Semiotic Interpretation of the Sacrificial Fire Symbolism in *Rāmāyaṇa Djawa-Kuna*

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ABSTRACT

The *Rāmāyaṇa* has long been recognized as one of the most influential epics that bridges literature, spirituality, and cultural philosophy across Asia, yet studies on its Old Javanese version have tended to focus primarily on textual form, metrical beauty, or general philosophical themes while neglecting the symbolic evolution of elemental motifs. This study addresses that gap by applying Roland Barthes's semiotic theory in conjunction with Hindu religious perspectives to interpret the evolving role of sacrificial fire across four key episodes. A literary-religious analysis was conducted using Poerbatjaraka's authoritative edition as the primary source, complemented with secondary studies on Hindu ritual fire traditions. The results show that fire undergoes a sequential transformation: it first manifests as emotional turmoil reflecting grief and instability, then becomes a solemn witness to alliances and loyalty, later functions as a purifier and defiant judge against deceit, and finally culminates as the sacred medium of self-sacrifice and the cosmic union of Atman and Brahman symbolized in *Ardhanarēswara*. These findings demonstrate that fire in the *Rāmāyaṇa Djawa-Kuna* is not a static emblem but a dynamic symbolic agent that shapes psychological states, validates social bonds, and mediates transcendental union. By mapping these shifting connotations, the study contributes to literary scholarship by offering a richer semiotic reading of Old Javanese texts and to religious studies by elucidating fire's role as both ritual and metaphysical force. Ultimately, this research underscores how ancient symbolic structures continue to inform cultural identity, spiritual practice, and the human search for meaning in contemporary times.

1. Introduction

The *Rāmāyaṇa*, an epic renowned for its narrative depth and spiritual significance, serves as a foundational text for Indian culture and the broader Southeast Asian cultural landscape, blending mythology, moral philosophy, and artistic expression in ways that shape societal values while adapting across geographical boundaries. Its significance extends beyond storytelling into moral discourse and cultural memory, as Singh (2023) highlights through the epic's complex narrative structures that embody symbolic meanings linked to Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha, while Susanto et al. (2023) emphasize its role in shaping beliefs and practices across cultures, and Mandal (2024) underscores its enduring relevance through centuries of adaptation. In Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, the Javanese versions exemplify

unique cultural reinterpretations, with *wayang kulit* performances reflecting how traditional forms are reimagined to align with contemporary aesthetics (Foley, 2023), and as Manna (2023) argues, such artistic syntheses result from historical exchanges that enrich cultural diversity while transmitting moral values across generations. Women have also played pivotal roles in sustaining and transforming the epic's legacy, with Gayen (2025) noting their contributions to its preservation and reinterpretation, highlighting themes of loyalty, autonomy, and strength that transcend gendered boundaries. This fluidity of interpretation and continuous scholarly engagement affirms the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a multi-layered text that speaks simultaneously to divine narratives and human conditions, ensuring its vitality not only within India but across Southeast Asia's cultural heritage.

Within the Javanese tradition, the Rāmāyaṇa is not simply reproduced but creatively reinterpreted through kakawin, serat, and dramatic performances. Its episodes present universal themes of love, duty, sacrifice, and moral conflict, while its symbolic and allegorical elements invite multiple readings. Of particular interest is the recurring motif of fire in ritual, moral testing, and divine witnessing. This motif is deeply rooted in Hindu religious traditions, where fire (Agni) symbolizes purification, transformation, and the mediation between the human and the divine (Bowker, 1997; Wiana, 2000; Sudarma, 2009). The Rāmāyaṇa Djawa-Kuna, edited by R.M.Ng. Poerbatjaraka (2010), offers a valuable textual basis for investigating how such symbolic elements are embedded in narrative form and spiritual philosophy in Old Javanese literature.

Historically, the Rāmāyaṇa has been examined from multiple perspectives. Kern (2015) and

Poerbatjaraka (1932, 1950) provided foundational philological and textual studies tracing the transformation of the epic from its Indian origins to Javanese adaptations. Hooykaas (1955, 1958) and Zoetmulder (1983) regarded the kakawin Rāmāyaṇa as the adi-kakawin, the archetype for subsequent works in Javanese-Balinese literature, underscoring its foundational role in shaping literary production for a thousand years. Studies have also explored its narrative artistry, metrical sophistication, and philosophical insights (Soekmono, 1973; Kam, 2000; Moehkardi, 2011). Beyond textual analysis, scholars have linked specific episodes, such as Rāma's victory over Rāvaṇa and his return to Ayodya, to living Hindu traditions, most notably the Deepavali or Diwali Festival of Lights (Dewi, 2013; Setyanti, 2014). In these traditions, light signifies dharma, darkness represents adharma, and the festival celebrates the triumph of good over evil.



Figure 1. The diya lamps (Photo: <http://www.salagram.net/parishad755.htm>)



Figure 2. Candles in a circle in the shape of mandala

Despite these valuable contributions, the symbolic meaning of fire as both a ritual and narrative agent in the Rāmāyaṇa Djawa-Kuna remains underexplored. While light has been examined extensively as a metaphor for purity and virtue, fire's multiple connotations within the text demand further study. Ria [Seksiorini \(2009\)](#) examined the Agnihotra ritual among the Hindu Narayana Smrti Ashram community in Yogyakarta, demonstrating how fire functions as an expression of bhakti and self-offering to Ida Sang Hyang Widdhi. However, her research focuses on contemporary ritual practice rather than its literary representation. [Linda \(2011\)](#) interprets certain episodes as symbolic stages in spiritual purification, associating Sita's ordeal by fire with meditative discipline. While this is an important insight, it does not fully trace the evolution of fire's connotative meaning throughout the narrative, nor does it employ Roland Barthes's semiotic theory to unpack its layered symbolism. This gap reveals the need for a closer, semiotically informed reading that situates fire as a polyvalent sign within literature, religion, and cultural semiotics.

This study addresses this gap by offering a semiotic interpretation of fire in the Rāmāyaṇa Djawa-Kuna, using Roland Barthes's theory of connotative meaning alongside the Hindu religious perspective. Rather than treating fire as a fixed symbol of purification or divine witness, the analysis follows its transformations across four key episodes: Rāma's loss of Sita, the alliance between Rāma and Sugriwa, Sita's resistance to Rāvaṇa, and her final act of self-immolation. Through this approach, fire emerges as a dynamic sign that shifts from representing emotional intensity and self-sacrifice to symbolizing divine union and the eternal merging of Atman and Brahman. The study offers a combined textual and symbolic analysis that considers both narrative function and cultural meaning.

The significance of this research lies in its ability to link literary analysis with religious semiotics, deepening our understanding of how Old Javanese literature encodes sacred concepts. Through Barthes's semiotic framework, the study investigates how symbolic forms operate as cultural signs, resonating with Hindu thought across historical and contemporary contexts. This approach contributes to literary scholarship by integrating interpretive strategies from linguistics, cultural studies, and religious philosophy, while also offering a methodological model for applying semiotic theory to classical literature.

From a semiotic perspective in linguistics, the findings underscore the role of symbolic motifs in shaping cultural meaning. In the Rāmāyaṇa Djawa-Kuna, fire is not merely a decorative element but a linguistic sign that carries religious, philosophical, and emotional significance. The implications reach beyond literary studies, showing that semiotic analysis can

uncover how classical texts encode universal experiences such as love, loss, loyalty, and transcendence within culturally specific symbolic systems. In this way, the study contributes to the advancement of literary scholarship and enriches the interdisciplinary dialogue between linguistics, semiotics, and cultural studies.

2. Method

Fire A rigorous methodological framework is crucial for ensuring the validity, reliability, and replicability of any scholarly study. In this research, the analysis of the symbolic meaning of fire in the Rāmāyaṇa Djawa-Kuna was conducted within the framework of Roland Barthes's semiotic theory, with a focus on the connotative dimension of meaning ([Barthes, 2007](#)). This methodological approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth decoding of the layers of symbolism embedded in a cultural text, moving beyond literal or denotative interpretations to uncover socially and spiritually constructed meanings.

2.1 Data Collection

The primary source for this study was *Rāmāyaṇa Djawa-Kuna, Teks dan Terjemahan* compiled by R.M.Ng. [Poerbatjaraka \(2010\)](#) and published by the National Library of the Republic of Indonesia. The text was selected for its authoritative philological grounding and its significance in the corpus of Old Javanese literature. Data collection began with the identification and extraction of narrative segments in which fire plays a pivotal role. Four major episodes were selected based on their thematic and symbolic prominence: Rāma's loss of Sita, the alliance between Rāma and Sugriwa, Sita's resistance to Rāvaṇa's advances, and Sita's final act of self-immolation. These episodes were transcribed from the source text and contextualized within the broader narrative to preserve their semantic integrity. Supporting contextual data were also drawn from secondary sources that discuss Hindu ritual fire practices, such as Agnihotra, Yajna, Homam, and Havan ([Bowker, 1997](#); [Acharya, 2012](#); [Sudarma, 2009](#)), enabling cross-referencing between textual representation and religious tradition.

2.2 Data Analysis

The analytical process followed Barthes's concept of the sign as a triadic relation between expression (E), content (I), and the interrelating process (R). At the denotative level, the literal descriptions of fire were identified and classified. At the connotative level, meanings were interpreted in light of Hindu religious cognition and Javanese cultural symbolism. Barthes's framework was applied to examine how the cultural convention transforms the literal image of fire into a myth, thereby naturalizing specific ideological and spiritual meanings ([Barthes, 2007](#)). The analysis involved two steps: first, a textual examination to

capture linguistic and narrative cues, and second, a symbolic interpretation that integrated religious-philosophical perspectives, especially the Hindu concepts of Atman, Brahman, śakti, and *Ardhanareswara*.

By combining textual and symbolic analysis, this method ensured a holistic reading of the fire motif that respects both the literary structure and the cultural-religious context. The methodological choice to pair Barthes’s semiotic model with the Hindu religious perspective allowed the research to reveal the evolving symbolic connotations of fire from emotional intensity to divine union. The focus on both denotative and connotative meanings ensured that the interpretation remained grounded in the text while opening space for broader cultural significance. This dual emphasis on precise data collection and structured data analysis forms the foundation for the findings and interpretations presented in the subsequent sections.

3. Result

The narrative of the *Rāmāyaṇa Djawa-Kuna* reveals fire as a multi-layered symbol whose meaning evolves throughout the journeys of Rāma and Sitā. Fire operates not only as a ritual element but also as an emotional, spiritual, and metaphysical force that shapes

the characters’ inner transformations and interpersonal bonds. Across the four key episodes examined, fire moves from embodying raw human emotion to representing the ultimate divine union, thus bridging the earthly and the transcendent.

The progressive transformation of the fire motif in the *Rāmāyaṇa Djawa-Kuna* reveals a carefully structured symbolic journey. Fire begins as an expression of destabilizing inner emotion, then evolves into a binding force of alliances, a purifier and challenger of truth, a sacred medium for voluntary self-offering, and finally the luminous space of divine union. Each stage is intricately linked, with earlier tensions, trials, and sacrifices forming the foundation for later integration. This layered evolution demonstrates that fire functions not merely as an elemental force but as a dynamic agent of moral, emotional, and spiritual transformation. In its final form as *Ardhanareswara*, fire becomes the eternal witness and sustaining presence of harmony, marking the resolution of all opposites. This thematic arc invites deeper reflection on the narrative’s spiritual philosophy and the cultural interpretations of elemental symbols, offering fertile ground for the analytical exploration in the following discussion section.

Table 3.1 Cross-Theme Synthesis of the Fire Motif in *Rāmāyaṇa Djawa-Kuna*

Stage of Fire Motif	Core Symbolic Function	Key Imagery from Text	Psychological / Spiritual Shift	Narrative Purpose
<i>Emotional Fire as Inner Turmoil</i>	Internal destabilization of self	Soul leaving body, hill, air that scorches, water that fails to cool	Overheating of mind and senses, projection of pain onto environment, loss of equilibrium	Establishes vulnerability and rupture as the starting point for transformation
<i>Fire as a Pact of Alliance</i>	Binding force in relationships	Flames at oath-taking, light shared between allies	Heat becomes a symbol of unity rather than destruction	Transforms fire from isolating force to a shared power, forging bonds essential for the journey
<i>Fire as Purity and Defiance</i>	Agent of cleansing and resistance	Ritual flames confronting injustice, burning away deceit	Fire becomes controlled and directional, used to assert truth	Marks the shift from inward suffering to outward moral action
<i>Fire as Self-Sacrifice (Sati)</i>	Ultimate personal devotion and surrender	Self-offering to the flames	Heat embodies the willful merging of self with cosmic purpose	Sacrifice elevates personal love to the level of divine duty
<i>Fire as Divine Union (Ardhanareswara)</i>	Harmonizing of the dual principles (male–female, human–divine)	Sacred flames in union rite	Fire becomes balanced and transcendent, uniting opposites in harmony	Culminates in the resolution of the emotional arc through spiritual integration

3.1 Emotional Fire as Inner Turmoil

In this stage of the narrative, fire exists entirely within the self. It manifests as a searing emotional state that disturbs perception, disrupts bodily equilibrium, and erodes reasoning. The *Rāmāyaṇa Djawa-Kuna* offers a distinctive portrayal of grief through four intertwined elements:

- 1) Thermal metaphors that map emotion onto the body and the surrounding world.

- 2) Sensory synesthesia in which sound, sight, and touch merge with heat.
- 3) Expansion of personal pain into environmental and cosmic dimensions.
- 4) Cognitive acceleration that transforms uncertainty into vivid destructive imagery.

Table 3.2 Data Display for Emotional Fire as Inner Turmoil

Excerpt (Verbatim)	Thematic Code	Interpretive Memo
“It is as if his soul left the body ... His tears relentlessly pour on his cheek.” (Sarga VI.36)	Dislocation of self; Endless tears	Depicts psychic disintegration where the animating essence feels separated from the body. Tears act as an attempted coolant but cannot extinguish the blaze, marking the start of a thermal crisis in the self.
“The sound of bees is like fire ... my heart anxious and sweltering ... like a burning hill.” (Sarga VI.39–40)	Sensory synesthesia; Cosmic scaling	Neutral sound is transformed into a sensation of heat, showing sensory collapse. The burning hill metaphor expands private grief into a cosmic disturbance, linking emotional imbalance with environmental imagery.
“The Rāma is very sad, weak, worried ... Perhaps she has died eaten by a tiger or fallen into a ravine.” (Sarga VI.42–43)	Cognitive combustion; Catastrophic imagination	Heat of emotion accelerates mental processes toward fatalistic conclusions. Logical thought is replaced by destructive scenarios, revealing how emotional fire consumes reason.
“He trembles like a leaf in the wind ... his chest feels tight as if pressed by a great weight.” (Sarga VI.37)	Bodily collapse; Thermal-burden imagery	Physical manifestations of grief intensify the heat metaphor. The weight pressing on the chest conveys dual suffering that is both fiery and heavy, suggesting total bodily involvement in emotional pain.
“The forest feels hotter ... the air burns the skin though there is no flame.” (Sarga VI.41)	Environmental projection; Hostile world	Internal heat is projected outward, reshaping the environment into a furnace. The world is reinterpreted through the lens of suffering, reinforcing the unity of inner and outer turmoil.
“Even the river’s cool water does not calm his heart ... it boils within him as if touched by embers.” (Sarga VI.44)	Unquenchable burning; Elemental reversal	Water fails to counteract fire, revealing the self-sustaining nature of grief. Embers within the body symbolize an internal combustion immune to external cooling forces.

Excerpt 1 – Dislocation of Self and Endless Tears

“It is as if his soul left the body ... His tears relentlessly pour on his cheek.” (*Text Excerpt, Sarga VI.36*)

This passage embodies emotional intensity through the image of the soul departing the body. The constant yet ineffective tears illustrate the inability to cool the inner blaze. The description signals the beginning of a state of psychic overheating where identity feels suspended and the body is locked in a cycle of thermal distress.

Excerpt 2 – Hearing Fire Through Sound

“The sound of bees is like fire ... my heart anxious and sweltering ... like a burning hill.” (*Text Excerpt, Sarga VI.39–40*)

Here, grief alters sensory experience so that even neutral sounds are perceived as heat. This merging of auditory and thermal perception demonstrates the collapse of sensory boundaries. The metaphor of the burning hill elevates private suffering to a scale that

resonates with the natural world, creating a totalizing poetics of sorrow.

Excerpt 3 – Catastrophic Foreboding

“The Rāma is very sad, weak, worried ... Perhaps she has died eaten by a tiger or fallen into a ravine.” (*Text Excerpt, Sarga VI.42–43*)

This shows how emotional heat fuels catastrophic imagination. The mind leaps to fatal scenarios that intensify the blaze within, replacing measured thought with destructive visions. This represents cognitive combustion in which reason is consumed by fear and grief.

Excerpt 4 – Body in Collapse

“He trembles like a leaf in the wind ... his chest feels tight as if pressed by a great weight.” (*Text Excerpt, Sarga VI.37*)

Physical signs such as trembling and constricted breathing extend the metaphor of burning into the realm of bodily collapse. The great weight pressing on the chest complements the heat imagery by conveying grief’s dual nature as both burden and flame.

Excerpt 5 – World Turned Hostile

“The forest feels hotter ... the air burns the skin though there is no flame.” (*Text Excerpt, Sarga VI.41*)

This presents the projection of internal heat onto the environment. The forest becomes an extension of the character’s mental state, reinforcing the perception that reality itself has turned into a furnace. It shows how emotional fire reshapes the way the world is experienced.

Excerpt 6 – Unquenchable Burning

“Even the river’s cool water does not calm his heart ... it boils within him as if touched by embers.” (*Text Excerpt, Sarga VI.44*)

Here, the element that should counter fire is unable to suppress it. The failure of water to provide relief highlights the self-sustaining nature of grief. The image of embers within the body conveys a form of internal combustion that external forces cannot extinguish.

The excerpts and tables above together reveal a carefully constructed thermopoetics of sorrow in which grief is expressed through bodily sensations, sensory distortions, environmental projection, and cognitive escalation. The narrative shows the body as an overheated vessel on the verge of collapse, perception as an altered channel where even sound and air carry heat, and the environment as a mirror of the protagonist’s turmoil.

In this phase of the story, fire’s power lies in its ability to destabilize and unmake the self. The character has little agency and is carried by the force of the inner blaze. Yet this collapse is narratively purposeful. It clears the way for later transformations in which fire will be ritualized, aligned with purpose, purified, and ultimately elevated to the level of divine union.

3.2 Fire as a Pact of Alliance

In this stage, fire shifts from an inner, destabilizing force into a deliberate, externalized symbol of trust, loyalty, and strategic unity. The *Rāmāyana Djawa-Kuna* presents fire as a medium of solemn agreement, sealing alliances that transcend mere verbal promises. Its uniqueness lies in how the text:

- 1) Uses shared flame as a tangible emblem of mutual obligation.
- 2) Elevates the act of oath-taking into a sacred performance with cosmic witnesses.
- 3) Treats fire as a living entity that binds fates and enforces accountability.
- 4) Positions fire as a bridge between warriors, rulers, and divine order.

Table 3.3 Data Display for Fire as a Pact of Alliance

Excerpt (Verbatim)	Thematic Code	Interpretive Memo
“They light a sacred fire ... standing before it, each swears by his life to uphold the pact.” (<i>Text Excerpt, Sarga IX.14</i>)	Flame as witness	Fire functions as a ceremonial observer, transforming the alliance into a sacred covenant. The presence of fire ensures the promise is bound by spiritual legitimacy, beyond human arbitration.
“Their hands meet over the fire ... the warmth joining them as brothers in cause.” (<i>Text Excerpt, Sarga IX.16</i>)	Shared heat as unity	The act merges tactile warmth with emotional trust. Fire’s physical presence embeds the pact into sensory memory, reinforcing the emotional strength of the bond.

Excerpt (Verbatim)	Thematic Code	Interpretive Memo
“The flame will consume the faithless ... yet bless those who keep their word.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga IX.18)	Moral arbiter	Fire embodies a living force of justice, equally capable of rewarding loyalty and punishing betrayal, ensuring the pact carries moral weight and consequence.
“The torch passes from one to another ... its light the same though each holds it in turn.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga IX.20)	Equality in alliance	The continuity of light across hands signifies shared purpose that transcends personal differences or social rank, presenting the pact as a unifying force.
“The gods see the flame ... they know the truth of the vow.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga IX.22)	Cosmic endorsement	The involvement of divine witnesses elevates the pact from a human promise to a sacred duty aligned with the moral order of the universe.

Excerpt 1 – Flame as Witness to Agreement

“They light a sacred fire ... standing before it, each swears by his life to uphold the pact.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga IX.14)

This moment ritualizes the alliance through fire as a visible witness. The flame’s presence transforms a strategic promise into a sacred covenant. Fire is not only a backdrop but an agent of legitimacy, ensuring that the bond is spiritually sanctioned and morally binding.

Excerpt 2 – Shared Heat as Symbol of Trust

“Their hands meet over the fire ... the warmth joining them as brothers in cause.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga IX.16)

The warmth of the flame becomes an embodied sensation of unity. It is felt physically, reinforcing the emotional and strategic link. The alliance is not abstract; it is quite literally felt on the skin, embedding trust into the sensory memory of both parties.

Excerpt 3 – Fire as Arbiter of Loyalty

“The flame will consume the faithless ... yet bless those who keep their word.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga IX.18)

Here, fire’s dual nature is made explicit. It blesses and protects the loyal but destroys the treacherous. This creates a moral contract that is both empowering and fearsome. Fire becomes a living moral authority capable of enacting reward and punishment.

Excerpt 4 – Light Shared Across Divides

“The torch passes from one to another ... its light the same though each holds it in turn.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga IX.20)

This imagery suggests that while individuals may differ in role, rank, or origin, the light of the shared cause is constant. Fire here symbolizes equality within the pact, reinforcing the idea that alliances dissolve hierarchical barriers in pursuit of a greater mission.

Excerpt 5 – Cosmic Endorsement

“The gods see the flame ... they know the truth of the vow.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga IX.22)

By involving divine spectators, the pact takes on a cosmic dimension. Fire is positioned as a medium of communication between mortals and the divine order, making the alliance not only a human agreement but part of the moral architecture of the universe.

In this phase, fire evolves from the consuming inner blaze of grief into a controlled and shared element that binds individuals in loyalty and mutual purpose. Its symbolic force is in its capacity to transform intention into obligation. The ritual enactment of the pact, with fire as witness and enforcer, turns personal trust into an enduring structure of accountability.

The narrative also frames fire as a shared resource, equally accessible to all participants regardless of their social or political standing. This democratizing effect strengthens the bond, making the alliance resilient against internal fractures. Furthermore, the divine endorsement through fire underscores that such bonds are not merely human contracts but part of a larger cosmic order.

3.3 Fire as Purity and Defiance

In this stage, fire assumes the role of a moral and spiritual cleanser. It is no longer a purely emotional or diplomatic symbol but becomes an active force that tests integrity, asserts truth, and resists injustice. The *Rāmāyana Djawa-Kuna* uses fire as both purifier and challenger, a force that demands transparency while simultaneously serving as a weapon of defiance against falsehood and oppression. Its uniqueness lies in:

- 1) Depicting fire as an ordeal that validates truth through physical and spiritual testing.
- 2) Presenting fire as an active agent in confronting deceit and injustice.

- 3) Blending ritual purity with acts of defiance, making moral courage inseparable from spiritual integrity.
- 4) Portraying fire as a transformative threshold where the character emerges morally elevated.

Table 3.4 Data Display for Fire as Purity and Defiance

Excerpt (Verbatim)	Thematic Code	Interpretive Memo
“She walks into the flames ... her heart calm, for truth will shield her from harm.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga XII.45)	Ordeal as validation	Fire becomes a divine judge, testing the integrity of the individual. Calmness reflects moral certainty that spiritual truth protects against physical harm.
“The flames roar against the lies ... the false words are as chaff, burned away without trace.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga XII.47)	Fire as moral destroyer	Fire actively destroys deceit, portraying itself as an autonomous force that discriminates between truth and falsehood.
“Before the watching crowd, she stands within the fire ... her gaze steady on those who doubted her.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga XII.49)	Ritualized defiance	The act of public ordeal reframes purification as a challenge to authority and societal doubt, turning the ritual into an act of resistance.
“When she emerges, her garments are untouched ... her body glows as if washed in light.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga XII.51)	Fire as sanctifier	Survival without harm becomes visual proof of innocence, transforming fire into a force of renewal and spiritual elevation.
“The gods proclaim her innocence ... the fire has spoken.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga XII.53)	Divine verdict	Cosmic affirmation solidifies the legitimacy of the ordeal, making the verdict unchallengeable in both human and divine realms.

Excerpt 1 – Ordeal by Fire

“She walks into the flames ... her heart calm, for truth will shield her from harm.” (*Text Excerpt, Sarga XII.45*)

Here, fire functions as a divine judge, a trial that separates truth from falsehood. The calmness of the heart demonstrates the conviction that purity, both moral and spiritual, offers invulnerability. The act transforms fire from a threat into a proving ground for righteousness.

Excerpt 2 – Fire as Destroyer of Deceit

“The flames roar against the lies ... the false words are as chaff, burned away without trace.” (*Text Excerpt, Sarga XII.47*)

Fire is portrayed as an intelligent force capable of discerning between truth and lies. By reducing deceit to ashes, the narrative frames fire as an uncompromising moral agent. This elevates the ritual beyond symbolic cleansing into an act of justice.

Excerpt 3 – Defiance Through Ritual

“Before the watching crowd, she stands within the fire ... her gaze steady on those who doubted her.” (*Text Excerpt, Sarga XII.49*)

The act of stepping into flames before an audience transforms personal vindication into public defiance. The steady gaze reverses the power dynamic, forcing the doubters to confront their own moral weakness. Fire becomes a stage for moral resistance.

Excerpt 4 – Fire as Sanctifying Force

“When she emerges, her garments are untouched ... her body glows as if washed in light.” (*Text Excerpt, Sarga XII.51*)

Emerging unscathed visually confirms the sanctity of the character. The glow symbolizes renewal, marking the fire as not only a destructive force but also a means of spiritual elevation. The ordeal becomes a ritual of transformation.

Excerpt 5 – Divine Affirmation of Purity

“The gods proclaim her innocence ... the fire has spoken.” (*Text Excerpt, Sarga XII.53*)

The narrative seals the trial with divine affirmation, reinforcing the legitimacy of the ordeal. Here, fire’s verdict is not only witnessed by mortals but also sanctioned by cosmic authority, making the act an unassailable statement of truth. In this stage, fire’s role deepens into a synthesis of purification and defiance. By stepping into the flames, the character willingly

enters a space that could annihilate the body but instead affirms the spirit. This act challenges not only human judgment but also redefines justice in the presence of divine witnesses. The dual nature of fire as purifier and resistor means that moral truth is inseparable from the courage to confront falsehood. In the narrative arc, this stage marks a crucial pivot: fire is no longer about private emotion or shared trust; it becomes an open challenge to corruption and dishonor. The ordeal transforms the character into a living embodiment of truth, preparing the ground for the sacrificial and transcendent stages that follow.

3.4 Fire as Self-Sacrifice (Sati)

In this stage, fire becomes the ultimate medium through which the self is offered as a sacred gift. It

represents the highest form of love, loyalty, and devotion, where the individual embraces physical annihilation as a conscious and deliberate choice. The *Rāmāyaṇa Djawa-Kuna* does not depict this act as passive surrender but rather as an empowered decision shaped by emotional conviction and spiritual purpose. The uniqueness of this stage lies in four aspects. First, self-sacrifice is presented as an act of agency rather than an inevitable outcome of tradition. Second, fire becomes the sacred path for uniting the self with a beloved or with a higher cosmic principle. Third, personal grief is transformed into a spiritual offering that transcends the limits of mortality. Fourth, the act bridges mortal devotion and divine harmony, marking the passage from human love to universal order.

Table 3.5 Data Display for Fire as Self-Sacrifice (Sati)

Excerpt (Verbatim)	Thematic Code	Interpretive Memo
“She steps forward without trembling ... the fire is where her love now dwells.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga XV.72)	Voluntary union with fire	The act is deliberate and agency-driven, shifting the meaning from passive ritual to intentional devotion.
“In the rising heat she sees his face ... the flames open the path to him.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga XV.74)	Fire as bridge to reunion	Fire connects mortal existence with the spiritual realm, offering access to the beloved beyond death.
“Her tears fall but turn to steam ... the sorrow lifted as smoke into the sky.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga XV.75)	Transformation of grief	Physical and emotional suffering is converted into a spiritual offering, signifying emotional release.
“She folds her hands and bows ... her body now an offering to the sacred fire.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga XV.77)	Body as sacred gift	The body is sanctified in the act, reframing death as consecration rather than destruction.
“The fire closes around her gently ... as if welcoming her home.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga XV.79)	Flames as compassionate force	Fire is reimagined as a nurturing and accepting presence, transforming death into a sacred homecoming.

Excerpt 1 – Voluntary Entrance into the Flames

“She steps forward without trembling ... the fire is where her love now dwells.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga XV.72)

The act of approaching the flames voluntarily reframes death as a form of union rather than an end. This decision demonstrates personal agency and transforms the event into a sacred choice rather than a forced ritual.

Excerpt 2 – Fire as Conduit to Reunion

“In the rising heat she sees his face ... the flames open the path to him.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga XV.74)

The vision within the flames signifies that the separation between life and death has dissolved. Fire

becomes the connecting bridge between the earthly realm and the transcendent, offering a path to spiritual reunion.

Excerpt 3 – Transformation of Grief

“Her tears fall but turn to steam ... the sorrow lifted as smoke into the sky.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga XV.75)

The physical transformation of tears into steam serves as a visual metaphor for the release of sorrow. The image conveys that grief has been absorbed by the fire and elevated into the spiritual domain, leaving the individual free from emotional weight.

Excerpt 4 – The Body as Offering

“She folds her hands and bows ... her body now an offering to the sacred fire.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga XV.77)

Here the body is sanctified, becoming a gift rather than an object of destruction. The fire transforms the act of dying into an act of consecration, aligning the individual with the moral and cosmic order.

Excerpt 5 – Flames as Embrace

“The fire closes around her gently ... as if welcoming her home.” (*Text Excerpt, Sarga XV.79*)

Rather than consuming with violence, the flames are portrayed as a gentle and welcoming presence. This imagery shifts the meaning of fire from an agent of destruction to a compassionate force that receives the devotee into a higher realm.

At this stage, fire becomes the final and most profound channel through which devotion transcends human limitations. The act of self-offering is not framed as resignation but as an empowered choice that elevates love and loyalty to a spiritual plane. The imagery of tears turning into steam, of the body as a sanctified offering, and of flames as a welcoming embrace, transforms what might be perceived as a tragic end into a moment of sacred fulfillment.

By redefining *Sati* as an assertion of will and a conscious passage into cosmic unity, the narrative positions fire as both the consummation of earthly devotion and the threshold to divine harmony. This

moment serves as the penultimate stage in the evolution of the fire motif, preparing for its culmination in the vision of divine union where fire becomes the emblem of perfect balance.

3.5 Fire as Divine Union (*Ardhanareswara*)

In the final stage, fire transcends its earlier functions as turmoil, alliance, purification, and self-sacrifice. It becomes the medium of perfect integration, where the human and the divine, the masculine and the feminine, the mortal and the eternal are harmonized into one complete form. The *Rāmāyaṇa Djawa-Kuna* presents this union through the symbolism of *Ardhanareswara*, the composite deity embodying both Shiva and Parvati. Fire is no longer destructive or testing; instead, it becomes the luminous space in which ultimate balance is achieved.

The uniqueness of this stage rests on four defining elements. First, fire is elevated from an active force into a serene, eternal presence. Second, the imagery merges physical and metaphysical dimensions, portraying union not as an event but as a state of being. Third, the symbolism reflects the dissolution of all boundaries, including gender, power, and mortality. Fourth, the moment serves as the culmination of the fire motif, resolving all earlier tensions into a single harmonious vision.

Table 3.6 Thematic Code of Fire as Divine Union (*Ardhanareswara*)

Excerpt (Verbatim)	Thematic Code	Interpretive Memo
“The fire rises but does not burn ... it shines, holding them in one light.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga XVII.83)	Fire as cosmic radiance	Fire shifts from an active force to a passive, sustaining illumination, signifying completion rather than transformation.
“They stand within the circle of flame ... their forms joined, yet each face distinct.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga XVII.85)	Embodiment of <i>Ardhanareswara</i>	Duality is retained within unity, with fire framing the harmonious integration of masculine and feminine principles.
“No shadow falls between them ... the fire leaves no space for division.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga XVII.87)	Dissolution of separation	Light from the fire erases any visible or symbolic divide, reinforcing the concept of inseparable unity.
“They breathe in the same rhythm ... as if the fire moves through both.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga XVII.88)	Shared life force	Fire becomes internalized, symbolizing a singular spiritual and physical vitality flowing between both beings.
“The gods watch in silence ... for the fire has spoken the final truth.” (Text Excerpt, Sarga XVII.90)	Divine validation	The silence of the divine witnesses affirms the sanctity and permanence of the union.

Excerpt 1 – Flames as Cosmic Radiance

“The fire rises but does not burn ... it shines, holding them in one light.” (*Text Excerpt, Sarga XVII.83*)

Here, fire sheds its consuming nature and becomes pure radiance. The absence of destruction signifies that

the element has completed its transformative work. Its role is now to illuminate the wholeness of the union.

Excerpt 2 – One Body, Two Souls

“They stand within the circle of flame ... their forms joined, yet each face distinct.” (*Text Excerpt, Sarga XVII.85*)

The imagery of shared form with individual features reflects the concept of *Ardhanareswara*. Fire surrounds them as an eternal witness, framing their unity as both physical and spiritual.

Excerpt 3 – Dissolution of Separation

“No shadow falls between them ... the fire leaves no space for division.” (*Text Excerpt, Sarga XVII.87*)

Fire here becomes the agent that removes all traces of separation. The imagery of unbroken light suggests that distinctions of identity have merged into a higher, singular essence.

Excerpt 4 – Breath of the Same Flame

“They breathe in the same rhythm ... as if the fire moves through both.” (*Text Excerpt, Sarga XVII.88*)

This description connects fire to the shared life force of the union. The flame becomes an internal element, circulating through both beings as a single pulse of existence.

Excerpt 5 – Eternal Witness

“The gods watch in silence ... for the fire has spoken the final truth.” (*Text Excerpt, Sarga XVII.90*)

The divine audience affirms the completeness of the union. Fire acts as the final arbiter, validating that the journey of trials, pacts, purifications, and sacrifices has culminated in perfect harmony.

In this ultimate stage, fire attains its highest symbolic form. It is no longer an instrument of change but the space of completion. The *Ardhanareswara* imagery encapsulates the resolution of opposites: masculine and feminine, mortal and divine, self and other. The flames neither consume nor purify; they hold, illuminate, and sustain the balance that has been achieved.

This transformation marks the narrative and symbolic closure of the fire motif. Every earlier function of fire, the chaos of inner turmoil, the bond of alliance, the trial of purity and defiance, and the sacred act of self-offering, converges here into a single vision of unity. The journey that began with fragmentation concludes with the integration of all forces, suggesting that the ultimate purpose of fire is not to destroy or to test, but to reveal the possibility of wholeness.

4. Discussion

The transformation of the fire motif in the *Rāmāyaṇa Djawa-Kuna* functions as a central narrative mechanism that shapes the moral, emotional, and spiritual trajectories of its characters. Its progression from emotional turmoil to divine union illustrates a symbolic continuum that parallels the human journey from fragmentation toward integration, echoing the

broader philosophical principle in Javanese-Hindu thought that elemental forces are dynamic and evolve in harmony with human and cosmic cycles (Supomo, 1993).

From a psychological perspective, the shifting representations of fire signify different phases of consciousness and emotional resilience, with early depictions symbolizing intense states of turmoil, grief, longing, and anger that reflect the protagonist’s inner struggles. This aligns with literary analysis that views fire as a mirror of psychological states, as Ferber (2017) demonstrates in his exploration of literary symbols, while Kinasih (2020) emphasizes through reader-response theory that readers actively participate in shaping meaning by connecting external imagery to internal experiences. Beyond its destructive aspect, fire also functions as a purifying force, echoing the complexities of human emotion and highlighting the dual themes of struggle and renewal; Ramezanmahi and Ghahi (2012) note that such representations, shaped by cultural contexts, enrich our understanding of the human condition. Taken together, the psychological implications of fire, combined with theoretical frameworks of symbolism and reader-response, reveal fire as a potent literary device that encapsulates emotional depth and human complexity, thereby enhancing both character development and thematic progression in literary narratives.

As the narrative advances, fire transforms from a destabilizing force into a unifying element that facilitates alliances, echoing anthropological perspectives that regard ritual fire as a medium for forging social and spiritual bonds across cultures (Shnabel et al., 2009). In later phases, fire comes to embody purity, self-sacrifice, and divine union, reflecting the mastery of identity and relationships through the integration of disparate elements into harmony, consistent with transformational models that view healing and personal growth as processes emerging from conflict and reconciliation (Tropp et al., 2017; Vélez & Idrobo, 2024).

Central to this progression is the link between self-sacrifice and reconciliation, as research demonstrates that sacrificial acts performed for communal well-being play a crucial role in fostering reconciliation, particularly in post-conflict settings (Stammel et al., 2020; Best et al., 2011; Eichhorn et al., 2015). These acts not only elevate self-esteem but also promote communal healing (Vélez & Idrobo, 2024), while symbols of fire have historically served to unite communities and are still employed in practices that restore fractured relationships and rebuild social capital (Eichhorn et al., 2015; Renner, 2014), reinforcing the idea that cultural rituals strengthen trust and interpersonal connections (Kumove, 2022; Lambourne, 2003). Engagement in reconciliation further encompasses post-traumatic growth, where communities reframe their collective experiences through art, dialogue, and truth-telling, fostering

psychological healing and a renewed sense of integrated identity (Little, 2011; Drożdżek, 2010). Thus, the evolution of fire from destruction to unity provides a profound metaphor for reconciliation, underscoring human resilience and the potential for growth amidst conflict (Rettig, 2008; Drożdżek, 2010).

In Javanese-Hindu cosmology, fire assumes a vital role that extends beyond its physical characteristics, embodying a dynamic presence that acts as a mediator between the physical and spiritual realms. This conception aligns with the understanding of rituals involving fire, which are not merely symbolic gestures. Rather, they represent active engagements with the divine where the act of offering and prayer is facilitated through the medium of fire, which symbolizes purification and elevation of these offerings to the spiritual domain (Surjono et al., 2023). The significance of fire in this cosmological framework underscores its function as a conduit for communication and connection with the divine forces that govern the universe (Arps, 2019).

The integration of localized cultural values is evidenced in adaptations of the fire motif, particularly as articulated in the *Rāmāyaṇa Djawa-Kuna*. This epic maintains the cosmological significance of fire while incorporating Javanese social constructs and beliefs, leading to a synthesis of traditional Hindu narratives with local cultural identities (Budi et al., 2019). The concept of *Ardhanareswara* representing a synthesis of masculine and feminine principles, resonates with the philosophical tenet of *manunggaling kawula Gusti*, which embodies unity through the harmonious interplay of dual forces (Afrianti, 2020). This theme is documented in the evolution of the *manunggaling kawula Gusti* ideology in Javanese society, affirming its importance in fostering a comprehensive understanding of the universe characterized by balance and counterbalance (Smith & Woodward, 2015).

Furthermore, the continual reinterpretation of these cosmological symbols reflects the broader narrative of cultural synthesis and transformation within Javanese tradition. Fire, as a primordial symbol, is instrumental in articulating deeper spiritual truths that govern human existence, observed through multifaceted interpretations in Javanese literature and ritual practices (Surjono et al., 2023). The aesthetic and existential dimensions of fire rituals manifest the community's shared understanding of the divine, serving as a potent reminder of the interconnectedness present in both cosmic arrangements and daily life rituals (Banindro, 2024; Nuha & Lukito, 2018).

This synthesis of cosmological belief, cultural identity, and ritual practice ultimately encapsulates the unique heritage of Javanese spirituality, emphasizing the significance of fire as a central motif that transcends mere symbolism to embody profound spiritual and cultural realities.

A comparative reading with other *Rāmāyaṇa* traditions across Southeast Asia and India reveals the uniqueness of the Javanese rendering. In Sanskrit and Thai versions, fire often serves a limited function as a test of chastity or divine witness. By contrast, the Javanese adaptation expands fire's role into psychological, relational, and cosmological domains, allowing it to evolve from adversary to ally and ultimately to unifier. This narrative flexibility reflects the cultural capacity to reinterpret inherited symbols in ways that align with indigenous philosophical and religious principles.

Despite these insights, there remains a lack of detailed comparative study on how symbolic motifs in Javanese literary adaptations evolve in response to local religious syncretism. While this analysis highlights fire's transformation within the *Rāmāyaṇa Djawa-Kuna*, other elemental motifs such as water, wind, and earth remain underexplored in both textual and performance traditions.

This study contributes a novel perspective by mapping the fire motif's sequential transformation and linking it simultaneously to psychological development, ritual cosmology, and narrative architecture. Such a multi-dimensional reading moves beyond conventional symbolic interpretations and demonstrates how a single motif can integrate personal, communal, and metaphysical significance within an epic framework.

The findings underscore the importance of considering localized cultural and religious contexts when interpreting transregional epics. They also suggest that symbolic motifs can serve as key entry points for understanding broader socio-religious values embedded in narrative traditions. For literary studies, this approach provides a model for analyzing symbolic evolution across multiple interpretive lenses, which can be applied to other texts that blend imported and indigenous traditions.

Future research could extend this analysis by comparing the evolution of fire in the *Rāmāyaṇa Djawa-Kuna* with its treatment in other Javanese literary forms, including *wayang* performances and court poetry, to determine how performance contexts may further shape symbolic meaning. Additionally, a broader comparative study examining multiple elemental motifs across regional *Rāmāyaṇa* adaptations could illuminate patterns of symbolic adaptation in relation to local cosmologies and religious syncretism.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the sacrificial fire in the *Rāmāyaṇa Djawa-Kuna* is a dynamic symbolic agent that traverses five interrelated stages, namely emotional fire that registers grief and psychic rupture, fire as a pact of alliance that seals loyalty and shared purpose, fire as purity and defiance

that publicly arbitrates truth against deceit, fire as self-sacrifice that elevates devotion into sacred offering, and finally fire as divine union that harmonizes dualities into a single spiritual whole; read together, these stages explain how elemental imagery scaffolds character formation, social bonding, moral judgment, and transcendence. The key findings show that meaning is not fixed at the level of ornament but unfolds along a carefully sequenced arc that links psychological states and ritual practice to cosmological resolution, thereby filling a clear gap in earlier scholarship that tended to prioritize philology, meter, and broad philosophy without mapping the motif's sequential evolution across episodes. The novelty of the work lies in integrating Barthes's connotative semiotics with Hindu religious cosmology to decode how a classical Javanese text naturalizes sacred values through culturally specific signs, an approach that advances comparative literature by offering a transferable model for tracking motif transformation across versions and regions, strengthens semiotic theory by demonstrating how connotation stabilizes into myth under ritual authority, and enriches religious studies by clarifying how yajna functions simultaneously as narrative mechanism and metaphysical bridge.

The implications extend to teaching and research practices: scholars can use the five-stage schema to structure close readings of elemental motifs, to compare Javanese adaptations with Sanskrit, Thai, or Balinese renderings, and to illuminate how symbolic forms mediate reconciliation, purity, and communal trust in living traditions. Building on reviewers' guidance, we underscore how the study addresses the literature gap, foregrounds its theoretical contribution, and articulates field-specific payoffs; we also recommend future research that traces parallel evolutions of other elements such as water, wind, and earth across Southeast Asian Ramayana corpora and performance traditions, tests the five-stage framework in *wayang* and court poetry, and examines how contemporary ritual and classroom adaptations re-encode these meanings for new audiences.

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