



The symbol of triwikramā scene in Surakarta style wayang kulit performances in the "kresna duto" story

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KEYWORDS

Wayang Performance,
Kresna Duto,
Triwikramā,
Symbol

ABSTRACT

The Triwikramā scene in Javanese wayang kulit performances, particularly in the "Kresna Duto" episode, holds profound symbolic and philosophical significance within the Surakarta style tradition. However, despite its centrality, the variations in its presentation by different dalang (puppeteers) remain underexplored. The study aims to identify and analyze the symbolic meanings embedded in the Triwikramā scene through the distinct narrative and visual strategies employed by three renowned puppeteers: Ki Nartosabdho, Ki Manteb Sudharsono, and Ki Purbo Asmoro. This research adopts Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic framework to examine both the signifier and signified elements manifested in the performances. The method includes a close reading of narration (verbal text) and visual transformation of the character Kresna into Brāhālā, based on recorded performances. Findings indicate that Ki Nartosabdho emphasizes a literary and poetic narrative, creating a dramatic and emotionally immersive portrayal of Triwikramā through rich metaphors and mythological elaboration. In contrast, Ki Manteb Sudharsono presents a more visually dynamic transformation with minimal narration, relying heavily on theatrical movement and musical cues to depict the moment of transformation. Ki Purbo Asmoro offers a balanced approach, combining concise narrative with visual elements to portray the symbolic shift effectively. Across all three performances, the symbolic triadic structure of miwiti (initiation), nêngahi (intervention), and mungkasi/ngadili (termination or judgment) emerges as a consistent interpretive pattern. This study contributes to the understanding of symbolic construction in Javanese traditional performance and offers insight into the performative variations among Surakarta-style puppeteers in representing metaphysical transformation.

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1. Introduction

Wayang kulit purwa is a traditional Javanese performing art form that has become an integral part of Indonesia's cultural richness. It has evolved over centuries and continues to serve as a powerful medium to convey epic stories from Javanese mythology, as well as cultural and moral values to society (Widagdo, 2018). This is in line with Soewarlan (2019), who said that art not only acts as a means of relaying the continuation of tradition but also as a support for human life and daily activities. The prominent advantage in the Purwo shadow puppet

show is the artist's ability to portray the character of the characters in the story in an impressive and interesting way (Pramulia, 2022). The concept of imagery is very important in analyzing the object of *Triwikramā* as the arrangement of words in expressing sensory experiences where the reader seems to be able to see, hear, and feel as seen (Rokhmansyah 2013: 17). *Triwikramā*, which often appears in shadow puppet shows, is one of the characters that attracts the attention of the audience. Usually, a character who can perform *Triwikramā* is known as a clever, wise, and strategic figure (Dermawan, 2018). In many Javanese puppet stories, the role and characteristics of *Triwikramā* often determine the direction of the story and carry a deep moral message. *Triwikramā* is particularly interesting because of her prominent characteristic of shape-shifting that allows the character to change her appearance according to her circumstances or actions, both visually and narratively. *Wayang kulit purwa* represents not only a form of artistic expression but also a profound medium for transmitting cultural values, moral teachings, and philosophical thought. Its significance extends beyond mere entertainment, functioning as a vehicle of cultural continuity and spiritual reflection within Javanese society. One of the most enigmatic and symbolically charged episodes in the *wayang kulit* repertoire is the *Triwikramā* transformation, particularly within the "Kresna Duto" narrative, that the character Kresna (Fitriana & Verrysaputro, 2021). Sudarsono (2012) recounts that in the Kresna Duta play in Javanese shadow puppet shows, the peak of the storyline occurs when the great war known as Bharatayuda Jayabinangun breaks out, which involves a battle between the Kurawa and Pandawa. At this point, there is a change in Kresna as the ambassador of the Pandhawa in the war with the Kurawa. Kresna turns into a giant, which is unusual for a character in *wayang*.

The concept of *Triwikramā*, originating from the Sanskrit term meaning "three great strides," denotes a moment of metaphysical transformation in which the character undergoes a dramatic change in form and essence. Within the context of Javanese *wayang*, this transformation is most notably embodied by the figure of Kresna, who is traditionally regarded as a manifestation of Vishnu. During the *Triwikramā* scene, Kresna temporarily transforms into a colossal, fearsome giant, *Brāhālā*, symbolizing divine wrath and cosmic judgment. This metamorphosis captivates audiences not only through its visual spectacle but also through its embedded philosophical symbolism, portraying a disruption of worldly order in response to injustice. Despite its narrative importance and visual grandeur, scholarly attention to the *Triwikramā* scene has largely remained general and descriptive, often neglecting a comparative symbolic analysis of how different puppeteers (*dalang*) interpret and construct this transformation. Existing literature has focused on dramaturgical aspects, mythological roots, or character functions, but little has been done to explore the *Triwikramā* scene as a site of symbolic negotiation, especially in relation to individual performance styles within the Surakarta tradition. This paper explores symbols through the narratives of three (3) puppeteers, namely Ki Nartosabdo, Ki Manteb Soedarsono, and Ki Anom Suroto, who perform the same *Triwikramā* scene to see what symbols are conveyed through character and storytelling in Javanese shadow puppet performances. Through symbols, this paper tries to elaborate the external concept that appears in the *Triwikramā* scene.

By analyzing the *Triwikramā* scene using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic model, this research aims to uncover the layered meanings of signs, both verbal and visual, in these performances. The study focuses not only on narrative content and visual representation but also on the interpretive depth conveyed through the unique styles of each *dalang*. This research contributes to the broader field of performance studies and Javanese cultural discourse by offering a semiotic analysis of transformation symbolism in *wayang kulit*. It highlights how traditional performance remains a dynamic and interpretive space, where mythological motifs like *Triwikramā* are continually redefined through the artistic agency of the puppeteer. Ultimately, the study provides a deeper understanding of the intersection between tradition, symbolism, and performative interpretation in classical Javanese art.

2. Method

This study employs Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic framework to analyze the symbolic construction of the *Triwikramā* scene in Surakarta-style *wayang kulit* performances, specifically within the "Kresna Duto" narrative. Saussure's model, which emphasizes the relational nature of the *signifier* (the material or perceptible form of a sign) and the *signified* (the conceptual content or meaning), serves as the primary analytical lens.

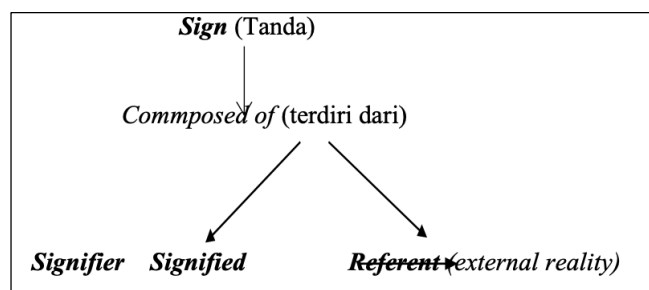


Fig. 1. Semiotics' Ferdinand de Saussure method (2012)

A sign is something physical (any sound-image) that can be seen and heard that usually refers to an object or aspect of reality to be communicated. The object is known as the referent. In communication a person uses a sign to send meaning about an object, and another person interprets the sign. The condition is that communicators and communicants must have the same language or knowledge of the sign system (Kriyantono, 2010: 271). A sign consists of a signifier, which is the real physical image of the sign when we receive it and the signified, which is a mental concept that refers to the real physical image of the sign. Mental concepts are widely recognized by members of a culture who share a common language (Fiske, 2012: 73). Saussure emphasized that the signifier is something that is related to the mental activity of a person who receives a signifier. According to Saussure, signs express ideas and signify that he disagrees with the Platonic interpretation of ideas as mental events to which the human mind is subjected. Thus, the sign is implicitly seen as a communicative means that resides between two people who communicate or express something to each other (Eco, 2009: 20). To operationalize this theory within the context of traditional *wayang kulit*, the research focuses on two core sign systems: (1) Narrative Verbal Signs: These include the spoken text (dialogue and narration) delivered by the *dalang* during the moment of transformation (*Triwikramā*), which functions as signifiers. The study identifies recurring linguistic elements—metaphors, descriptive imagery, and symbolic references—and analyzes how they construct and convey the idea of metaphysical transformation and moral authority. (2) Visual and Performative Signs: These refer to the actual movements, puppet transitions, iconographic symbols (such as the *gunungan/kayon*, Kresna puppet, and Brāhālā puppet), and musical cues used during the transformation scene. These visual and auditory elements are treated as signifiers that work together to generate meaning in relation to the *Triwikramā* transformation. The corpus of the study consists of recorded *wayang kulit* performances of the "Kresna Duto" episode by three eminent Surakarta-style *dalang*: Ki Nartosabdho, Ki Manteb Sudharsono, and Ki Purbo Asmoro. Each performance is examined through a three-phase analytical process:

- Transcription and Translation: Verbal narrations surrounding the *Triwikramā* scene are transcribed and translated into English for comparative analysis.
- Identification of Semiotic Units: Each segment of the scene (e.g., invocation, conflict, transformation, resolution) is broken down into its key signs—both verbal and visual. These are coded and categorized according to their function as signifiers.
- Interpretive Mapping: The relationship between signifiers and their culturally situated signifieds (e.g., divine transformation, moral judgment, cosmic disruption) is analyzed to uncover how each *dalang* constructs meaning through his performance.

By applying this method, the study moves beyond descriptive comparison and toward a

semiotic reading of how performance styles encode and recontextualize the *Triwikramā* transformation. This approach also allows for the exploration of the symbolic logic inherent in Javanese performance traditions and highlights how aesthetic choices by each *dalang* reflect distinct philosophical orientations toward transformation, power, and justice.

3. Results and Discussion

This research focuses on *Triwikramā* as a scene that changes the character of Kresna. Character development in traditional performing arts such as shadow puppetry in the “*pethilan*” Kresna Duta not only involves the story but also closely relates to the symbols that appear in the story “Kresna Duta.” Visually, it is depicted as Fig. 2.



Fig. 2. Exchange when *Triwikramā*

The narration of *Triwikramā* in the play Kresna Duta is one of the interesting phenomena to be analyzed in terms of symbols. So, we need to first look at the narration spoken as a sign from the three puppeteers as follows:

3.1. Narasi Ki Nartosabdho:

Midanget aturipun Raden Haryo... Styaki, Nata Kresna Kagyat salebeting penggalih srakatan kang astha, nyenggol bedoring panah Kyai Kesawa boten kanthi kenjana yana, Dadi aji bolo sewu jleg sirna sifaing nata Dwarawati. Dadi Brāhālā sak gunung, telung gunung, pitung gunung ngebaki jagat, yen jumeneng mestakane sundul langit tunda sanga, yen gedrug bumi sikile ambles bumi sabpitu, klawe klawe kang astha tepung gelang jagad kaweratan. Saknalika sirah dadi sewu, grana sewu, tutuk sewu, netra kalih ewu. Geter para titiang wong sak ngastina bebasan jagat kaya kontal awit saking Triwikramāning nalendra ing Dwarawati.

In English it is interpreted as follows:

Hearing the report of Raden Haryo Styaki, King Kresna was surprised in his heart, trembling his hands, touching the power of Kyai Kesawa's bow weapon unexpectedly, becoming the power of Bālāsewu, losing his nature Prabu Kresna from the Dwarawati country became a Rāksāsā as high as a mountain; three mountains and seven mountains filled the world. If standing with his head up to the sky, Sab Seven's hands were seen to the end of the world. Instantly the head became a thousand, a thousand noses, a thousand mouths, two thousand eyes. The trembling of the people in the kingdom of Astina was likened to the world about to be eaten because of the Triwikramā of King Dwarawati.

3.2. Narasi Ki Manteb Soedarso:

Kocap kacarita kaya ta mangkana, wong agung ing Dwarawati, nalika seman sigra kinarubud sadang Sata Kurawa, parandine nalika semana Sang Prabu Sri Bathara Kresna sakecap kewala dhatan

kawios pangandikane, namung nalika semana, kumlawe astane Prabu Kresna anyampe Pusaka Kyai Kesawa, ilang wujudte Prabu Kresna jleg dadiya Brāhālā segunung gedene.

In English it is interpreted as follows:

Told in the current situation, the King of Dwarawati was being attacked by the Kurawas, but in fact, Prabu Kresna did not speak and remained silent, but at that moment, the movement of Prabu Kresna's hand holding the Kyai Kesawa Heritage disappeared, and Prabu Kresna's embodiment became a giant as tall as a large mountain.

Visually, Prabu Kresna was transformed into Brāhālā. The subject matter is that when he was ganged up on by the Kurawa, he was considered cunning in the war that would occur. The battle in question is Bharatayudha.

3.3. Narasi Ki Purbo Asmoro:

Kinubut dening para kurawa, Nata Agung Prabu Hari Murti (Kresna), tumbuh tumbuh sotaning galing Prabu Kresna wauta, tuwuh durgamaning galih sang Prabu Kresna, sigra akarya gegiro nyenggol bedoring kyai Kesawa mekar sarirane sakgunung, rong gunung, tulung gunung, pitung gunung ngebaki jagat.

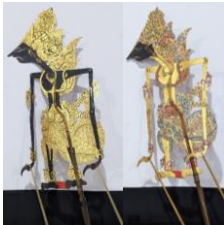
In English it is interpreted as follows:



Besieged by the Kurawa, King Dwarawati, in his heart full of resentment at the Kurawa, and Prabu Krena, in his anger, touched the magic of Kyai Kesawa; his body became as big as a mountain, and two mountains, three mountains, and seven mountains filled the world.

3.4. Semiotic Analysis

Visually, the stages of the Triwikramā scene have the same visual form as shown in Table 1. The concept of *miwiti* refers to the attempt to initiate a warning for the subject's mistake. The concept of *nêngahi* refers to the attempt to continue the warning. The concept of “*mungkasi*” refers to an attempt to end the protracted occurrence of wrongdoing. The concept of *mungkasi* thus also has the meaning of *ngadili*, which is the concept of upholding justice in the midst of protracted injustice as a manifestation of fundamental wrongdoing. Looking at the narrative transitions performed by the three puppeteers, it can be seen that the same pattern of symbols is used using wayang Kresna, then wayang Gunung Kayon, and wayang Brāhālā. This symbol is found in Triwikramā and becomes Javanese cultural knowledge through Javanese shadow puppets that focus on the Triwikramā scene.

Table 1. Signifier and signified analysis of Triwikramā

Signifier	Signified
	Kresno: The king of the country of Dwarawati, Titis Bathara Vishnu, has aji, or advantages, in performing Triwikramā and can transform into a large Brāhālā.

Signifier	Signified
	Gunungan is Kayon. Kayon is a symbol of the philosophy of life that has meaning in the description of the human journey or a symbol of the beginning of a new life and various philosophies of life. When kayon is displayed, then there is a sign that there will be a new life or story, and kayon can represent any element in the illustration of Wayang, the shadow puppet show.
	Brāhālā: A scary giant figure in a change of form or transformation of a character from a main or ordinary character to a scary and frightening character. It shows Kresno's anger when confronted with the Kurawa.
External Reality: The meaning of three changes in the steps to solve the problem is found in Triwikramā. That is, in the face of the subject's individual faults, the triwikrāmā character has a humanitarian role that is <i>miwiti</i> , <i>nêngahi</i> , and <i>mungkasi</i> or <i>ngadili</i>	

4. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the symbolic construction of the *Triwikramā* scene in the “Kresna Duto” narrative is deeply influenced by the distinctive performative and narrative choices made by each puppeteer. Through a semiotic analysis grounded in Saussure’s theory of signs, the research has uncovered how each *dalang* not only interprets but also reconfigures the meaning of *Triwikramā* to reflect different aesthetic, philosophical, and communicative intents. Ki Nartosabdho’s performance is characterized by rich literary narration and mythopoetic imagery, emphasizing *Triwikramā* as a moment of divine transcendence and cosmic authority. His choice to extend the metaphorical language and dramatize the transformation highlights the metaphysical and moral gravity of Kresna’s act. In contrast, Ki Manteb Sudharsono reduces verbal narration and emphasizes kinetic movement and visual impact. His focus on theatricality turns *Triwikramā* into a spectacle of power, rendering the transformation scene immediate, physical, and awe-inspiring. Meanwhile, Ki Purbo Asmoro offers a balanced approach that synthesizes both verbal clarity and visual expression, presenting *Triwikramā* as a culturally resonant act of justice through compositional economy. These stylistic differences enrich the interpretive landscape of the *Triwikramā* scene and contribute to a deeper understanding of how transformation is symbolized not only as a change in physical form, but also as a metaphoric enactment of divine intervention and moral rectitude. The concept of *miwiti* (initiation), *nêngahi* (intervention), and *mungkasi/ngadili* (termination or judgment) emerged as a structural and philosophical thread across all three interpretations, suggesting a shared cultural grammar despite individual performative variance. However, the study is not without limitations. Firstly, it focuses exclusively on Surakarta-style *wayang kulit* and does not engage with interpretations from other stylistic traditions such as Yogyakarta or Banyumasan, which may reveal different symbolic patterns. Secondly, the analysis is based on recorded performances, which, while rich in content, do not fully capture the immediate audience reception, spatial dynamics, or live improvisational choices made during actual staging. Furthermore, the interpretation of symbolic signs remains inherently subjective and culturally embedded; while semiotic analysis offers valuable insights, it must be situated within a broader ethnographic and performance-theoretic framework. Future research might explore comparative studies across regional traditions, include ethnographic fieldwork, or integrate cognitive-semiotic approaches to deepen the

analysis of symbolic transformation in traditional performance arts. Nonetheless, this study provides a foundational semiotic reading of *Triwikramā* in *wayang kulit* and demonstrates how performative interpretation remains central to the transmission of cultural symbolism and moral imagination in Javanese arts.

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