

**CONTRADICTION AND HARMONY IN THE
SIGNS OF SENSUALITY IN *SERAT CENTHINI*
AND *KITAB QURROTUL 'UYUN*:
A Saussurean Semiotic Analysis**

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Abstract

Discourse on sensuality in the Nusantara literary tradition always lies at the intersection of the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the physical. Two monumental texts from two different major traditions the Serat Centhini from Javanese culture and the Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun from the Islamic pesantren tradition offer a wealth of paradoxical signs of sensuality. This study examines the representation of signs of sensuality in both texts using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic approach. The main focus is to identify the signifiers and signifieds that shape the meaning of sensuality and to analyze the forms of contradiction and harmony in the governance of signs of sensuality between the two texts. The research method used is a qualitative approach based on library research with Saussurean semiotic analysis. The results of this study indicate that Serat Centhini employs a metaphorical-poetic strategy with signifiers from the realms of nature, mysticism, and aesthetics (mustikha, Sang Hyang Otapatra, prang tandhing) to envelop biological signifiers, while Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun employs a more explicit strategy but frames it within a constellation of religious signifiers (intention, prayer, sharia). Both texts reject the dichotomous separation between physical and spiritual realities, dialectically integrating contradictions into transformative harmony. These findings contribute to an understanding of how sensuality is symbolically constructed in the Nusantara literary tradition and offer a constructive model for dialogue between local culture and religious values.

Keywords: *Serat Centhini, Qurrotul Uyun, Sensuality, Semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure, Sign, Contradiction, Harmony*

Introduction

The discourse on sensuality within the Nusantara literary tradition has consistently occupied the intersection between the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the corporeal. On the one hand, sensuality is often regarded as a taboo subject that should not be openly discussed; on the other hand, it constitutes an integral theme in numerous classical texts that convey moral, mystical, and religious teachings. This tension suggests that sensuality should not be understood merely as a biological phenomenon, but also as a cultural construct embedded within a system of signs and meanings.

Within the corpus of Javanese literature, *Serat Centhini* stands as one of the most representative works illustrating this complexity. Simuh (2021, pp. 25–28) explains that *Serat Centhini* was compiled in the early nineteenth century by Ki Ngabei Ranggasutrasna, R. Ng. Yasadipura II, and R. Ng. Sastradipura as an encyclopedic work documenting nearly every aspect of Javanese culture. Likewise, Marsono (1991, p. 1) characterizes *Serat Centhini* as an encyclopedia of Javanese civilization because it encompasses diverse subjects, including philosophy, arts, culinary traditions, mysticism, and sensuality.

In its treatment of sensuality, *Serat Centhini* goes beyond portraying sexual relations as a purely biological activity. Susilo (2018, p. 9) argues that the text constructs a paradoxical relationship between sensuality and spirituality, in which sensuality can function both as a pathway toward mystical experience and as an obstacle when human desire remains uncontrolled. Furthermore, Susilo (2018, p. 12) maintains that this paradox constitutes a deliberate ideological strategy employed by the authors of *Serat Centhini* to position bodily experience as an integral stage in humanity's spiritual journey.

In contrast to *Serat Centhini*, which emerged from the Javanese literary tradition, *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* originated within the intellectual milieu of Islamic pesantren and is firmly grounded in the normative framework of Islamic law. Rohman (2018, pp. 23–25) explains that

the text discusses marital relations, the etiquette of sexual intercourse, and sexual education within the framework of Islamic jurisprudence. Nevertheless, its treatment of sexuality has not been free from criticism. Khamidah (2018, pp. 145–147) argues that certain classical Islamic texts on sexuality continue to reproduce patriarchal perspectives by positioning women primarily as objects within sexual relationships.

Despite originating from different cultural traditions, both texts address a similar epistemological concern: how sexual experience is represented through systems of signs while preserving its moral and spiritual legitimacy. This issue is particularly significant because the same biological reality can be expressed through remarkably different linguistic choices, metaphors, and symbols depending on the cultural horizon in which it is embedded. Consequently, sensuality in both texts should not be understood merely as an issue of sexual ethics, but rather as a process of meaning production through systems of signification.

Building upon this problem, the present study employs Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory as its principal analytical framework. The concepts of *signifier* and *signified* enable the researcher to distinguish between linguistic forms and the concepts they represent (Saussure, 1959, pp. 66–67). Furthermore, Saussure's principle of the arbitrariness of the sign explains why the same reality of sensuality can be represented through different systems of signs in *Serat Centhini* and *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* (Saussure, 1959, pp. 67–69). The analysis is further developed through syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations, allowing the interpretation to move beyond the level of individual words toward the broader discourse structures that generate meaning (Saussure, 1959, pp. 123–124).

Unlike previous studies, which have generally examined *Serat Centhini* and *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* independently, this study brings the two texts together within a single Saussurean semiotic framework to identify both the contradictions and the harmonies embedded in their

systems of signification concerning sensuality. Accordingly, this research not only compares the content of the two texts but also explains how each tradition constructs the meaning of sensuality through distinct semiotic mechanisms.

Sensuality from Islamic and Javanese Perspectives

An understanding of sensuality in classical Javanese literature cannot be separated from the broader Islamic worldview that shaped the intellectual landscape of Javanese society during the formative period of its literary tradition. As the dominant religion, Islam does not regard sensuality as a taboo subject; rather, it recognizes it as an inherent aspect of human nature that attains legitimacy when expressed within the institution of marriage. The Qur'an addresses this subject through language that is both explicit and ethically refined. One of its principal foundations is found in Q.S. Ar-Rūm [30]:21, which states that God created spouses so that human beings may attain tranquility (*sakinah*) and cultivate *mawaddah wa rahmah* (love and compassion) as the foundation of family life. Accordingly, marriage is understood as a *mīthāqan ghalīẓan* (a solemn covenant), constituting the only legitimate institution through which human sexual desires may be fulfilled. From the Islamic perspective, sensuality within marriage serves three fundamental purposes: preserving human lineage (*procreation*), fostering love and compassion (*mawaddah wa rahmah*), and achieving peace and tranquility (*sakinah*) (Ali, 2006, p. 98; Q.S. Ar-Rūm [30]:21).

Within the Islamic intellectual tradition, Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) offers a more profound understanding of the body and sensuality. Unlike Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), which emphasizes normative and legal dimensions, Sufism seeks to uncover the inner reality (*ḥaqīqah*) underlying outward experiences through symbolic interpretations of both sacred texts and lived reality. Consequently, sensuality in the Sufi tradition is not understood merely as a biological relationship but as a metaphor (*majāz*) representing the spiritual journey of love (*'ishq*)

between humanity as the lover (*'āshiq*) and God as the Ultimate Beloved (*Ma'shūq*). Within this framework, bodily union symbolizes humanity's existential longing for spiritual union with the Creator (Al-Ghazālī, 1982, p. 49; Chittick, 1983, p. 56).

Meanwhile, within the classical Javanese worldview, the cosmos is conceived as an ordered whole founded upon the principles of balance and the unity of complementary opposites, such as male and female, heaven and earth, and the external and the internal. Consequently, sexual relations are understood not merely as biological acts but as symbolic manifestations of the union of these universal principles, through which life is generated and cosmic harmony is sustained. In this context, sensuality in classical Javanese literature constitutes a cultural code that can only be fully understood through Javanese epistemology, particularly the concepts of *sangkan paraning dumadi* (the origin and ultimate purpose of existence), the harmony between the microcosm and the macrocosm, and various forms of spiritual discipline (*laku*) that guide individuals toward existential perfection. Accordingly, representations of sensuality in Javanese literary works extend far beyond erotic expression, embodying philosophical, cosmological, and spiritual meanings that form an integral part of the Javanese worldview (Woodward, 1989, pp. 1–5).

Signs of Sensuality in *Serat Centhini* and *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun*. The Relationship between Signifier and Signified

The core of the semiotic analysis of sensual signs in *Serat Centhini* and *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* lies in examining how both texts represent the relationship between human biological desire and spiritual values through systems of signification. Within Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic framework, every sign (*sign*) consists of two inseparable components: the *signifier*, which refers to the observable linguistic form, whether spoken or written, and the *signified*, which denotes the mental concept represented by that linguistic form (Saussure, 1959, pp. 66–67). The relationship between the two is arbitrary, meaning that no inherent or natural connection exists between a particular signifier and its signified. Consequently, the same

biological reality—such as sexual activity, reproductive organs, or physical pleasure—may be represented through a wide variety of signifiers depending on the cultural conventions, belief systems, and interpretive horizons of a given society (Saussure, 1959, pp. 67–69).

The principle of arbitrariness provides the theoretical foundation for understanding how *Serat Centhini* and *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* construct representations of sensuality. Although both texts address the same biological realities, neither presents them in a vulgar or purely descriptive manner. Instead, sexual experience is articulated through diverse semiotic strategies, including metaphor, symbolism, euphemism, and religious terminology, all of which redirect the reader's attention from the biological dimension toward broader philosophical and spiritual meanings. From a Saussurean perspective, the signifieds of sexual activity, reproductive organs, and bodily pleasure remain central to the meaning being conveyed; however, they are expressed through signifiers deliberately drawn from the domains of aesthetics, cosmology, and religion. Consequently, sensuality in both texts is understood not merely as a physiological experience but as a symbolic construction that reflects the ways in which Javanese culture and the Islamic tradition conceptualize the relationship between the body, desire, and spirituality.

***Serat Centhini*: Metaphor and the Sacralization of Sensuality**

Serat Centhini represents sensuality through a rich network of metaphors, ensuring that biological realities are never presented in a vulgar manner but are instead embedded within culturally significant symbols. Kristianto (2021) identifies a number of sexual metaphors in *Serat Centhini*, particularly in Pupuh 190–193, demonstrating how sacred signifiers are employed to represent signifieds related to sexual activity and reproductive organs. From the perspective of Saussurean semiotics, this strategy illustrates that the meaning of sensuality is constructed through cultural conventions that associate particular signifiers with specific concepts, rather than through any natural relationship between the two (Saussure, 1959, pp. 66–69).

Table 1. Sexual Metaphors in *Serat Centhini* (Pupuh 190–193)

No.	Signifier	Signified	Source
1	<i>Mustika</i> (jewel/gem)	Female genitalia	Pupuh 190, verse 24
2	<i>Sang Hyang Otapatra</i> / <i>Sang Hyang Gambira</i>	Sacred names referring to the female genitalia	Pupuh 190, verse 24
3	<i>Wiwaraning baga</i> (gate/opening)	Vagina	Pupuh 193, verse 13
4	<i>Prang tandhing</i> (battle/warfare)	Sexual intercourse	Pupuh 193, verse 13
5	<i>Rananggana</i> (battlefield)	Place of sexual intercourse	Pupuh 193, verse 13
6	<i>Raksa putih</i> (white essence)	Semen	Pupuh 191, verse 31
7	<i>Asrep kalangkung nikmate</i> (refreshingly pleasurable)	Orgasmic pleasure	Pupuh 191, verse 31

Source: Adapted from Kristianto (2021) based on Serat Centhini, Vol. III.

As shown in Table 1, the metaphor *prang tandhing* ("battle" or "warfare") constitutes one of the most prominent signifiers representing sexual intercourse. The choice of warfare as a metaphor is far from arbitrary. Within the classical Javanese cosmological worldview, warfare signifies not merely physical confrontation but also heroism, self-discipline, strategic wisdom, and the struggle to attain victory. Consequently, sexual intercourse is not reduced to the gratification of biological desire; rather, it is conceptualized as a disciplined practice requiring spiritual maturity and self-mastery. From a Saussurean perspective, the substitution of the literal signifier of sexual activity with the metaphor of warfare exemplifies the transformation of meaning through the Javanese cultural system,

whereby biological experience acquires a more elevated symbolic significance (Saussure, 1959, pp. 123–124).

The sacralization of sensuality is further manifested through the use of divine appellations such as *Sang Hyang Otapatra* and *Sang Hyang Gambira* as signifiers for the female genitalia. Kristianto (2021) interprets these metaphors as symbols signifying that the female reproductive organ possesses profound value and remains under divine protection. Accordingly, the female genitalia are represented not merely as biological organs but as symbols of purity, life, and the continuity of human existence. This shift in signification demonstrates how *Serat Centhini* constructs the meaning of sensuality through a process of sacralization, positioning the female body within a symbolic realm that transcends its purely physical dimension.

The representation of sensuality becomes more explicit in the narrative of the first marital encounter between Syekh Amongraga and Niken Tambangraras in *Serat Centhini*, Volume I, Pupuh 28 (*Dhandhanggula*). Although the episode depicts the wedding night of the newly married couple, the narrative is conveyed through refined literary language and rich symbolism, allowing erotic expression and spiritual experience to coexist harmoniously. This is evident in the following passage:

“Sang dyah ngalumpruk tanpa swiwi, / sumarah mring sakersaning Hyang, / sinartan pangucap alon: ‘Kakang Amongraga, sampun dangudangua, wus kawrat ingkang tyas ingsun, dening brangta marang sira, enggal lahirna nak-ingsun.’ Sigra Sang Amongraga anambut, samwi ngandika arum: ‘Dhuh yayi mas wong ayu, sira iku badanku, kalawan aku pan jiwamu, yen sira lunga, aku tanpa raga, yen pisah lawan awakmu, uripku tan mikolihi.’”

From a semiotic perspective, the phrase “*Sang dyah ngalumpruk tanpa swiwi*” (“the noble lady collapsed without wings”) functions not only as a signifier describing Niken Tambangraras's physical posture of surrender but also as a signified representing complete submission to the Divine Will. Sensuality here symbolizes the relinquishment of the ego, resonating with the Javanese mystical concept of *mati sajroning urip* (“dying while living”), in which individuals abandon personal

desires in pursuit of a higher spiritual union. Thus, erotic language simultaneously functions as mystical language, expressing humanity's inner spiritual journey.

This interpretation is reinforced by Amongraga's declaration, "*sira iku badanku, kalawan aku pan jiwamu*" ("you are my body, and I am your soul"), which symbolizes the inseparable unity of body and soul. Within the horizon of Javanese philosophy, this expression represents the union of *purusha* and *prakriti*, that is, the integration of the masculine principle as consciousness with the feminine principle as the source of life. Sexual union is therefore understood not merely as a biological act but as a symbol of cosmic harmony that reconciles the physical and spiritual dimensions into a unified whole.

The integration of sensuality and spirituality constitutes one of the defining characteristics of *Serat Centhini*. Kristianto (2021) explains that sensual experience in this work is consistently situated within the framework of the mystical journey, encompassing the four stages of spiritual realization: *shari'ah*, *ṭarīqah*, *ḥaqīqah*, and *ma'rifah*. These stages are understood as an interconnected and inseparable process leading toward spiritual perfection. Accordingly, erotic experience is not regarded as an ultimate end but as an integral part of humanity's journey toward a deeper knowledge of God. This teaching emerged from a synthesis between Islamic mysticism—shaped by the thought of prominent Sufi figures such as Al-Jīlī, Abdul Qadir al-Jailani, Al-Ghazālī, and Jalaluddin Rumi—and the Javanese traditions of *asmaragama*, Tantric philosophy, and Old Javanese cosmology. It is precisely this synthesis that enables *Serat Centhini* to represent sensuality as a space where biological experience, cultural symbolism, and spiritual quest converge into a unified system of meaning.

Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun: Explicit Representation and the Sacralization of Sensuality

Unlike *Serat Centhini*, which represents sensuality through poetic metaphors and symbolic expressions, *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* adopts a more explicit and normative approach while remaining firmly grounded within the framework of Islamic law. The work is a commentary (*sharh*) on a didactic poem composed by Shaykh Qasim ibn Ahmad ibn Musa ibn Yamun and was systematically elaborated by Shaykh Muhammad al-Tihami al-Maliki. Through this commentary, al-Tihami presents a clear and accessible exposition of various aspects of marital life, including conjugal relations. His discussion encompasses the ethics of sexual intercourse, the recommended times for intimacy, the importance of cultivating emotional closeness before intercourse, proper etiquette (*adab*) in accordance with Islamic teachings, and the supplications (*du'a*) recommended before intercourse as a means of spiritualizing sexual relations (Rohman, 2018, pp. 23–25).

Although its language is considerably more direct than that of *Serat Centhini*, *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* nevertheless constructs sensuality through a system of signs that frames sexual relations as an act of worship rather than merely the fulfillment of biological desire. This orientation is evident in Shaykh Muhammad al-Tihami al-Maliki's explanation of the etiquette preceding marital intercourse:

"...It is proper for a husband to kiss his wife on both cheeks and both temples, beginning with the right side. He should also kiss her upper chest where the necklace rests, kiss the top of her feet, and kiss the palm of her hand when she wears a ring. He should gently place his hand upon her forehead as a gesture of protection from harm and speak kind words to her, such as, 'You are my wife.' His intention should not be merely to satisfy or test his sexual desire..."

From a Saussurean semiotic perspective, this passage demonstrates that sexual relations are represented through signifiers

such as affection, tenderness, supplication, and proper etiquette. These signifiers shift the meaning of sexual intercourse away from a purely biological act toward broader signifieds, including worship, respect for one's spouse, and moral responsibility within married life (Saussure, 1959, pp. 66–69). In other words, sexual relations are not portrayed as a domain governed solely by desire but rather as an expression of mutual affection that derives its religious legitimacy from obedience to Islamic teachings.

In contrast to *Serat Centhini*, which constructs the meaning of sensuality through cosmological symbolism and Javanese mysticism, *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* establishes its system of signification upon normative Islamic values. Every stage of the marital relationship—from expressions of affection and supplication to mutual respect and kindness—functions as a signifier directing readers toward signifieds such as divine blessing (*barakah*), tranquility (*sakinah*), love and compassion (*mawaddah wa rahmah*), and devotion to God. Consequently, sexual pleasure is not understood as the ultimate objective but rather as the natural outcome of a relationship founded upon ethical conduct and spiritual commitment.

The contrast between these two systems of signification illustrates that, although both texts address the same biological reality, they construct meaning through distinct cultural conventions. *Serat Centhini* employs literary metaphors, cosmological symbols, and mystical language to sacralize sensual experience, whereas *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* relies on normative discourse, Islamic etiquette, and religious prescriptions to situate the same experience within the framework of worship. From Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic perspective, this difference demonstrates that the meaning of sensuality is not inherent in biological reality itself but is produced through culturally and religiously constructed systems of signification (Saussure, 1959, pp. 123–124).

The didactic verses (*naẓm*) state:

قَبَّلَ الْوَجْهَينِ وَالْخَدَيْنِ / وَ لَتَكُنْ الْبِدَايَةُ بِالْيَمِينِ // وَ قَبَّلَ النَّحْرَ وَ نَحَرَ الْقَدَمِ /
كَذَاكَ بَطْنُ الْكَفِّ عِنْدَ التَّخَنُّمِ // وَ امْسَحْ بِيَدٍ فَوْقَ الْجَبِينِ مَاسِحًا / كَفَّ الْأَدَى عَنْ نَاطِرِ
الْمُصَابِحَا // وَ قُلْ كَلَامًا طَيِّبًا وَ حَسَنًا / كَقَوْلِ أَنْتَ أَهْلِي لَا تَكُنْ تُمْتَحَنُ

These verses indicate that sexual relations in *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* begin with a sequence of actions emphasizing affection, respect, and gentleness. Kissing the cheeks, temples, chest, and hands, together with gently stroking the forehead, functions not merely as physical foreplay but also as symbolic expressions of care and reverence toward one's spouse. Likewise, the recommendation to utter kind and affectionate words before intercourse underscores that marital intimacy should be founded upon compassionate communication rather than driven solely by sexual desire. Thus, sexual relations are presented as an integrated experience encompassing biological, emotional, and spiritual dimensions.

From the perspective of Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics, the system of signification employed in *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* is considerably more literal than that found in *Serat Centhini*. The signifiers consist of concrete actions—kissing, caressing, offering prayers, and treating one's spouse with kindness—so that the relationship between the signifier and the represented reality appears more direct. Nevertheless, the signified extends far beyond these physical acts, encompassing broader concepts such as respect for one's spouse, adherence to Islamic etiquette, and devotion to God. In other words, these biological actions acquire new meaning because they are situated within a religious framework that defines sexual relations as an act of worship rather than merely an act of physical gratification (Saussure, 1959, pp. 66–69).

This phenomenon corresponds with Rohman's (2018, pp. 23–25) concept of the sacralization of sexuality, namely the transformation of sexual relations from the mere fulfillment of biological needs into a religious practice endowed with ethical and

spiritual significance. Within this framework, *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* not only provides practical guidance concerning marital intimacy but also constructs a comprehensive system of signs that associates every action with the values of worship. Consequently, adherence to Islamic etiquette and legal prescriptions is understood as an expression of obedience to God, while neglecting these teachings carries not only interpersonal consequences but also moral and religious implications. Sexual pleasure, therefore, is ultimately portrayed not as the primary objective of marital intimacy but as the natural consequence of a relationship grounded in affection, mutual respect, and fidelity to Islamic teachings.

Contradictions and Harmonies in the Governance of the Signs of Sensuality

Within Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic framework, every sign (*sign*) is constituted through the relationship between the *signifier* and the *signified*. The *signifier* refers to the material form of the sign, whether expressed through speech or writing, whereas the *signified* denotes the mental concept represented by that form. The relationship between these two components is arbitrary, meaning that no natural or intrinsic connection exists between a particular signifier and its signified (Saussure, 1959, pp. 66–69). Consequently, the same signified may be represented by different signifiers, while a single signifier may generate different signifieds depending on the social conventions, cultural contexts, and systems of values within which it operates. This principle of arbitrariness provides the theoretical basis for the diverse constructions of sensuality across cultural and religious traditions.

In the context of *Serat Centhini* and *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun*, the apparent contradiction in the governance of the signs of sensuality emerges from the tension between two conceptual domains that are often regarded as oppositional. On the one hand lies biological desire, which is universal, physiological, and commonly associated with the

profane dimension of human existence. On the other hand stand spiritual values, which are understood as sacred, transcendent, and oriented toward moral and religious purity. Both texts confront the same semiotic challenge: how to represent sexual experience without reducing it to the mere satisfaction of biological instinct while simultaneously preserving its human, ethical, and spiritual significance. Accordingly, the systems of signification employed in both works function not only as instruments of communication but also as cultural mechanisms that transform the meaning of sensuality into broader moral, philosophical, and religious horizons.

From a Saussurean perspective, this strategy demonstrates that the contradiction between biological desire and spirituality is not resolved by eliminating either dimension but rather through the production of new meanings within the system of signs. *Serat Centhini* negotiates this tension by employing metaphors, cosmological symbols, and mystical language that sacralize sensual experience. In contrast, *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* adopts more literal forms of expression while rigorously framing them within the Islamic concepts of intention (*niyyah*), supplication (*du'a*), proper etiquette (*adab*), and religious law (*shari'ah*). Although the two texts employ different semiotic mechanisms, both demonstrate that sensuality can be articulated openly without sacrificing modesty, sacredness, or spiritual orientation. These findings further affirm that the meaning of sensuality is not inherent in biological reality itself but is instead produced through semiotic constructions shaped by the cultural and religious systems of their respective traditions.

Contradictions in *Serat Centhini*

Serat Centhini constructs a distinctive system of signification by representing sexual reality through metaphors drawn from sacred, aesthetic, and philosophical domains. From the perspective of Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics, this strategy demonstrates that the signifieds of reproductive organs, sexual activity, and bodily pleasure

are represented through signifiers associated with elevated concepts such as deities, precious jewels, palaces, and warfare. This relationship reveals a striking paradox: signifiers that are culturally regarded as sacred are employed to represent biological realities often considered profane. Yet it is precisely through this process of signification that the meaning of sensuality is transformed from mere biological instinct into a concept endowed with philosophical and spiritual legitimacy (Saussure, 1959, pp. 66–69).

This phenomenon is clearly illustrated in the metaphors identified by Kristianto (2021) in *Serat Centhini*, Volume III, Pupuh 190 (*Kinanthi*), verse 24:

*“Mustikaning rahsa mulya rinêksa pra jawatadi aran Sang Hyang
Otapatra Sang Hyang Gambira sêsith.”*

*“The precious jewel is guarded by the noble deities, known as Sang
Hyang Otapatra and Sang Hyang Gambira.”*

In this passage, *mustika* ("precious jewel") together with the divine names *Sang Hyang Otapatra* and *Sang Hyang Gambira* functions as signifiers for the female genitalia. Within a Saussurean framework, these expressions serve not merely as euphemisms but also as signifiers that generate new signifieds, portraying the female reproductive organ as sacred, precious, and protected by divine power. Kristianto (2021) argues that the female genitalia in *Serat Centhini* are understood not simply as biological organs but as symbols of sacredness intimately connected with the divine. Consequently, the apparent contradiction between the profane and the sacred does not negate biological reality; rather, it elevates that reality into a higher spiritual horizon.

A similar paradox characterizes the relationship between sensuality and spirituality throughout the text. Susilo (2018, p. 9) argues that sensuality in *Serat Centhini* performs a dual function: on the

one hand, it serves as a pathway toward spiritual realization; on the other, it may become an obstacle when individuals become trapped in the pursuit of sensual gratification alone. At the denotative level, the text provides knowledge concerning sexuality and marital relations. At the connotative level, however, it constructs sensuality as an inseparable dimension of humanity's spiritual journey. At the ideological level, *Serat Centhini* presents sensuality as a field of moral testing capable of bringing individuals closer to—or farther from—God, depending upon how desire is interpreted and governed (Susilo, 2018, p. 12).

This interpretation is reinforced by Susilo's analysis of the compositional strategy employed in *Serat Centhini*. According to Susilo, the compilers deliberately juxtaposed passages on sensuality and spirituality in a dialectical arrangement, creating both tension and dialogue between the two domains. This strategy was not intended to oppose sensuality and spirituality but rather to demonstrate that they constitute complementary dimensions of human formation. Readers are therefore encouraged to move beyond a dichotomous understanding and recognize that bodily experience may function as a medium through which spiritual realization is attained.

This perspective is expressed explicitly in *Serat Centhini*, Volume III, Pupuh 191 (*Asmaradana*), verses 21–22:

*“Pamarsudining sarésmi / kang wus sun-gélar sadaya / kanggo swana
lantarane / dèmya yun angawrubana / mring asal wijinira / manungsa
sajatinipun / kasbut tēmbung paribasan.”*

*“The knowledge of sexual union that has been fully explained serves as
a means for human beings to understand the origin of the seed of life.”*

*“Sing sapa wonge tan uning / marang wiji asalira / sayéktine nora
wérub / mringjati paraning sèdya / kang tēmbé wékasannya / kacrita
kurang satuhu / mring sampurnaning kamuksan.”*

"Whoever does not understand the origin of the seed does not truly comprehend the ultimate purpose of human existence and will not attain the perfection of death."

From a Saussurean perspective, the concept of *wiji* ("seed") functions not merely as a signifier of humanity's biological origin but also as a symbol of its existential origin. Knowledge of reproduction is therefore positioned as a gateway to understanding *sangkan paraning dumadi*—the origin and ultimate destination of human existence. This shift demonstrates how a biological signifier expands its signified into a far broader philosophical and spiritual concept.

Through this construction of meaning, *Serat Centhini* ultimately reconciles the apparent contradiction between biological desire and spirituality. Desire is not portrayed as something that must be suppressed or eliminated; instead, it is understood as a human potential that should be directed and disciplined so that it becomes a means of attaining *sampurnaning kamuksan*—the perfection of spiritual fulfillment. Consequently, sensuality in *Serat Centhini* is not presented as the antithesis of spirituality but as one possible path toward self-knowledge and knowledge of God when interpreted within the proper framework of spiritual discipline (*laku*).

Contradictions in *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun*

Unlike *Serat Centhini*, which constructs representations of sensuality through poetic metaphors and symbolic language, *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* employs a more explicit system of signification while remaining firmly grounded in the normative framework of Islamic law. Discussions of sexual relations are presented in a direct and systematic manner; however, they are consistently situated within the ethical, devotional, and moral dimensions of marriage. From Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic perspective, this contrast demonstrates that the two texts utilize different signifiers to represent essentially the same signified, namely human sexual relations. Whereas *Serat Centhini* relies upon metaphor and symbolism to generate

meaning, *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* employs more literal signifiers that nevertheless direct readers toward religious and spiritual signifieds (Saussure, 1959, pp. 66–69).

The central contradiction within *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* lies in the tension between the explicitness of its discussion of sexuality and the sacred framework within which that discussion is embedded. The text describes marital intimacy in considerable detail, covering such matters as the recommended times for intercourse, the importance of foreplay, appropriate conduct during intercourse, and the supplications to be recited before and after sexual relations. Yet this openness is not intended to stimulate eroticism or sensationalize sexuality. Rather, it functions as a form of sexual education grounded in mutual affection, respect between spouses, and adherence to Islamic teachings. Accordingly, *jīmā'* (sexual intercourse) is understood not merely as the fulfillment of biological desire but as an integral component of establishing a harmonious family life and attaining divine blessing (*barakah*) (Rohman, 2018, pp. 23–25).

Within Saussure's semiotic framework, the principal signifiers employed in *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun*—including supplication (*du'a*), intention (*niyyah*), proper etiquette (*adab*), gentleness toward one's spouse, and compliance with Islamic law (*shari'ah*)—serve to shift the signified of sexual relations from the biological domain to the spiritual domain. Although sexual activity is universally rooted in human physiology, it acquires a new layer of meaning because it is consistently associated with worship and devotion to God. This semantic transformation illustrates that the signified is not naturally inherent in sexual activity itself but is instead produced through the system of signs established within the Islamic intellectual tradition (Saussure, 1959, pp. 123–124).

This phenomenon corresponds closely with Fatkur Rohman's concept of the **sacralization of sexuality**, which describes the transformation of sexual relations from a purely biological act into a religious practice endowed with ethical and spiritual significance

(Rohman, 2018, pp. 23–25). Within this construction, *niyyah* (intention), *du'a* (supplication), and adherence to *adab* function as the primary signifiers that redefine sexual intercourse as an act of worship. Consequently, marital intimacy is evaluated not solely in terms of physical satisfaction but also according to its conformity with Islamic ethical and legal principles. Violations of prescribed etiquette and religious norms are therefore understood not only as diminishing the quality of marital relations but also as moral transgressions carrying spiritual consequences before God. In this way, *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* presents sensuality as the meeting point between human biological needs and spiritual responsibility, demonstrating that physical pleasure and religious devotion are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary dimensions of a holistic understanding of marriage.

Comparison of the Semiotic Strategies of the Two Texts

The analysis demonstrates that *Serat Centhini* and *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* share a common objective of reconciling biological desire with spiritual values, yet they achieve this objective through markedly different semiotic strategies. These differences are evident not only in their linguistic styles and modes of presentation but also in the mechanisms through which meaning is constructed to represent sensuality. From Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic perspective, the distinct signifiers employed by each text produce different signifieds, even though both ultimately refer to the same biological reality. Accordingly, the systems of signification found in each work reflect the cultural and religious worldviews from which they emerged (Saussure, 1959, pp. 66–69).

Table 2. Comparison of the Semiotic Strategies in *Serat Centhini* and *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun*

Aspect	Serat Centhini	Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun
Genre / Medium	Javanese poetic composition (<i>tembang</i>) with fixed meters and epic narrative	Islamic legal treatise (<i>fiqh</i>), a prose commentary (<i>sharh</i>) on a didactic poem (<i>naZm</i>)
Language	High-register Javanese (<i>krama</i>) rich in symbolism	Arabic accompanied by Javanese <i>Pegon</i> (interlinear <i>makna gandul</i>) translation
Strategy of Signification	Metaphorical, symbolic, associative, and poetic	Literal and explicit, yet framed by Islamic legal and ethical principles
Types of Signifiers	Nature, warfare, precious jewels, deities, and cosmological symbols	Jurisprudential terms such as <i>nikāḥ</i> , <i>jīmā'</i> , <i>wājib</i> , <i>sunnah</i> , supplication (<i>du'a</i>), and <i>adab</i>
Mechanism of Sacralization	Spiritual metaphors, divine symbolism, and Javanese cosmology	Intention (<i>niyyah</i>), supplication, <i>adab</i> , and adherence to <i>shari'ah</i>
Primary Signified	<i>Manunggaling kawula lan Gusti</i> (the mystical union of the servant and God) and spiritual perfection	The realization of a <i>sakinah</i> family, worship, and the attainment of God's pleasure
Principal Contradiction	Sensuality functions both as a path toward spirituality and as a potential obstacle to spiritual realization	Explicit discussion of sexuality is integrated within a framework of sacredness and worship

Source: Compiled by the author based on Susilo (2018), Kristianto (2021), Irawan (2022), and Rohman (2018).

Table 2 demonstrates that the principal distinction between the two texts lies not in the subject they address but in the semiotic strategies through which meaning is produced. *Serat Centhini* constructs sensuality through metaphors that associate the human body with cosmological, mystical, and philosophical symbols. As a result, biological reality undergoes simultaneous processes of aestheticization and spiritualization, encouraging readers to interpret sensuality as an integral stage in the pursuit of existential and spiritual perfection. In contrast, *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* adopts a more direct mode of expression by employing normative terminology derived from Islamic jurisprudence. Nevertheless, it consistently situates sexual relations within the framework of worship and obedience to *shari'ah*. Consequently, the explicit treatment of sexuality functions not as erotic discourse but as a medium of moral and religious instruction.

Despite employing different systems of signification, both texts ultimately converge upon the same fundamental orientation: the rejection of the assumption that sensuality and spirituality are inherently incompatible. In *Serat Centhini*, this reconciliation is achieved through symbolic language and mystical discipline (*laku*) that guide individuals toward *manunggaling kawula lan Gusti*, the mystical union between humanity and God. By contrast, *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* constructs the same relationship through the Islamic concepts of worship (*ibādah*), proper etiquette (*adab*), and moral responsibility within married life. Thus, the apparent contradictions found on the surface of both texts should be understood as semiotic strategies designed to harmonize the biological and spiritual dimensions of human existence within coherent systems of meaning. These findings further reinforce Saussure's proposition that the meaning of sensuality is not fixed or inherent in biological reality itself but is continually constructed through systems of signs shaped by the cultural values, religious traditions, and intellectual frameworks of their respective societies (Saussure, 1959, pp. 123–124).

Comparative Classification of Signs

To gain a deeper understanding of the differences between the systems of signification employed by the two texts, the following comparative classification illustrates how identical or similar signifiers may generate markedly different signifieds within each tradition.

Table 3. Comparative Classification of Signs in *Serat Centhini* and *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun*

No.	Signifier	Signified in <i>Serat Centhini</i>	Signified in <i>Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun</i>
1	Sexual intercourse	Kamanungsan (the process of becoming a complete human being): a spiritual discipline leading toward the unity of ultimate reality	Al-Waṭ' (lawful sexual relations): a legitimate act of worship within marriage, intended for procreation and the prevention of <i>zīnā</i>
2	Semen	Rahsa Jati (the essence of true being): a sacred substance whose mastery carries profound spiritual significance	Al-Maniyy (semen): a biological fluid governed by Islamic legal rulings concerning ritual purity
3	Male genitalia	Cipta (divine creativity): a symbol of masculine creative power representing the active cosmic principle (<i>Purusha</i>)	Al-Dhakar (male reproductive organ): a biological organ that must be protected from prohibited acts such as <i>limāṭ</i> and <i>zīnā</i>
4	Female genitalia	Pradana (the cosmic womb): the gateway to death and rebirth, symbolizing the mystery of existence (<i>Prakṛitī</i>)	Al-Farj (the protected private part): the lawful place for procreation, metaphorically described as a cultivated field (<i>ḥarth</i>)

			whose legal status depends upon a valid marriage contract
5	Sexual position	Sajatine Rasa (the geometry of spiritual experience): variations of position symbolize stages of the mystical journey	Jā' a fi duburihā: sexual conduct regulated by <i>shari'ah</i> , emphasizing lawful practice and ethical boundaries
6	Nakedness	Kesucian Awal (primordial purity): a return to original human nature (<i>fitrah</i>) and existential authenticity	'Awrah: the parts of the body that must be covered, symbolizing modesty (<i>ḥayā'</i>) and obedience to Islamic law
7	Orgasm	Patining Raga (the death of the body): a temporary state of transcendence resembling mystical emptiness (<i>śūnyatā</i>)	Inzāl (ejaculation): a biological event that necessitates <i>ghusl al-janābah</i> (major ritual purification), rather than spiritual ecstasy
8	Embrace	Pamoring Kawula-Gusti (the union of the servant and God): a microcosmic representation of cosmic unity	Ḍammah (embrace): an expression of affection recommended to ensure that marital intimacy is compassionate rather than merely mechanical

The comparison presented in Table 3 demonstrates that the distinction between *Serat Centhini* and *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* extends beyond differences in cultural background to encompass fundamentally different semiotic structures. *Serat Centhini* constructs a system of signification in which physical reality consistently functions as a metaphor for spiritual reality, transforming biological experience into a symbolic pathway toward mystical realization. In contrast, *Kitab*

Qurrotul 'Uyun recognizes physical reality as an autonomous aspect of human existence while simultaneously subordinating it to the normative framework of Islamic law. Consequently, although both texts address the same biological phenomena, they produce profoundly different systems of meaning through distinct relationships between signifiers and signifieds. From a Saussurean perspective, this comparison confirms that meaning is not inherent in biological reality itself but is generated through culturally specific systems of signification, each reflecting the philosophical, religious, and intellectual traditions from which it originates (Saussure, 1959, pp. 66–69; 123–124).

Harmony as Dialectical Integration

In *Serat Centhini*, harmony is not understood as the elimination of the contradiction between the body and the soul but rather as the integration of both into a higher order of meaning. Within this framework, sensuality is not positioned as the antithesis of spirituality but as one of the pathways through which human beings may attain inner perfection. The ultimate goal is *manunggaling kawula lan Gusti*—the existential union between humanity and God. Consequently, sexual experience is interpreted as a reflection of the relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm, whereby every bodily experience possesses a symbolic dimension that points toward the search for spiritual meaning. From Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic perspective, the signified of sexual activity undergoes continuous semantic expansion through signifiers rich in religious and philosophical symbolism. As a result, sensuality transcends the level of biological experience and becomes a mode of spiritual and transcendental realization (Saussure, 1959, pp. 66–69).

Kristianto (2021) argues that the enjoyment of sexual relations becomes a *sādhana*—a path of spiritual discipline—only when it is directed toward inner cultivation and self-perfection. Under these circumstances, sexual union is no longer regarded as an end in itself

but as a means of attaining a higher level of spiritual consciousness. Conversely, when sexual relations are pursued solely for the gratification of biological desire, their spiritual dimension is lost. Thus, the meaning of sensuality in *Serat Centhini* depends fundamentally upon the inner orientation of the individual. When sexual activity is practiced as a form of contemplative laku that reconnects human beings with the origin and ultimate purpose of existence (*sangkan paraning dumadi*), biological experience is transformed into spiritual experience, guiding the individual toward *manunggaling kawula lan Gusti*.

By contrast, harmony in *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* is achieved through a different mechanism. Whereas *Serat Centhini* relies upon literary symbolism and mystical discourse as the medium of integration, *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* situates sexual relations within the framework of worship governed by Islamic law (*sharī'ah*). Sexual intimacy is understood as an integral component of married life aimed at establishing a family characterized by *sakinah, mawaddah wa rahmah*, while ultimately seeking the pleasure of God. Within this system, the tension between personal desire and spiritual obedience is reconciled through the concept of *adab*, a comprehensive ethical framework governing intention (*niyyah*), conduct, and the mutual responsibilities of husband and wife. Accordingly, biological pleasure is neither rejected nor suppressed; rather, it is directed so that it remains within the ethical boundaries of worship and human well-being (*maṣlaḥah*) (Rohman, 2018, pp. 23–25).

From a Saussurean perspective, the harmony constructed by both texts should not be understood as a static condition but as the outcome of an ongoing process of signification that continually integrates apparent contradictions into coherent systems of meaning. Although *Serat Centhini* and *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* employ different signifiers, both ultimately generate signifieds that position sensuality as an integral dimension of humanity's spiritual journey. Harmony, therefore, emerges not through the elimination of the tension between

desire and sacredness but through each tradition's capacity to reinterpret biological experience within broader philosophical and religious horizons. In this way, body and soul, desire and spirituality, are understood not as opposing realities but as complementary dimensions in the process of human perfection.

Table 4. Strategies of Harmonization in *Serat Centhini* and *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun*

Aspect	Serat Centhini	Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun
Strategy of Harmonization	Transformation (<i>desire</i> → <i>sādhana</i> → <i>manunggaling</i>)	Regulation (<i>desire</i> → <i>governed by adab and shari'ah</i>)
Semiotic Mechanism	Metaphors that sacralize sensual experience	A legal-ethical framework that legitimizes sensual experience
Ultimate Goal	Spiritual perfection through <i>manunggaling kawula lan Gusti</i>	The realization of a <i>sakinah</i> family and the attainment of God's pleasure
Attitude toward Desire	Desire is transformed rather than suppressed	Desire is guided and regulated rather than suppressed

The comparison presented in Table 4 demonstrates that the two texts adopt different yet complementary approaches to resolving the relationship between sensuality and spirituality. *Serat Centhini* emphasizes transformative integration, in which desire is elevated into a medium of mystical realization through symbolic and philosophical reinterpretation. In contrast, *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* emphasizes normative integration, in which desire is disciplined through Islamic ethics and legal prescriptions so that it becomes an act of worship. Despite these differing semiotic strategies, both traditions converge

upon the same essential principle: sensuality is not inherently opposed to spirituality but acquires its ultimate meaning through the cultural and religious systems of signification that govern its interpretation. This convergence reinforces Saussure's insight that meaning is not naturally embedded within human experience but is continually produced through culturally constituted relationships between signifiers and signifieds (Saussure, 1959, pp. 123–124).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *Serat Centhini* and *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun*, when examined through the relationship between the signifier and the signified within Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic framework, both reject a dichotomous separation between the corporeal and the spiritual dimensions of human existence. Despite emerging from distinct intellectual and cultural traditions, the two texts construct systems of signification that integrate sensuality into a broader spiritual horizon. Consequently, sexual relations are understood not merely as biological activities but as meaningful practices embedded within religious and philosophical frameworks. These findings affirm that the meaning of sensuality is not inherently attached to sexual activity itself; rather, it is produced through systems of signs shaped by the cultural and religious values of each respective tradition (Saussure, 1959, pp. 66–69).

Serat Centhini constructs a sublimative semiotic field through symbolic signifiers such as *mustika*, *Sang Hyang Otapatra*, *Sang Hyang Gambira*, and *prang tandhing*. These signifiers function not merely as literary metaphors or euphemisms but as mechanisms that transform biological signifieds into spiritual symbols carrying profound philosophical and cosmological significance. Sexual relations are therefore represented as part of a spiritual discipline (*sādhana*) leading toward *manunggaling kawula lan Gusti*, the mystical union between humanity and God. From a Saussurean perspective, this process illustrates how changes in signifiers generate an expansion of the

signified, allowing sensuality to transcend the fulfillment of desire and become a pathway toward higher spiritual consciousness (Saussure, 1959, pp. 123–124).

By contrast, *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* employs a more literal semiotic strategy through signifiers such as *nikāḥ* (marriage), *jīmā'* (sexual intercourse), *du'ā'* (supplication), *niyyah* (intention), and the legal prescriptions of *shari'ah*. Although these signifiers are more direct than those found in *Serat Centhini*, the overall system of signification consistently directs readers toward religious signifieds. Sexual activity is invariably situated within the framework of worship, so that every biological act derives moral legitimacy through righteous intention, prayer, and obedience to Islamic teachings. Accordingly, sexual relations are never portrayed as autonomous profane acts but as integral components of a broader system of meaning linking married life to the spiritual objectives of establishing a *sakinah* family, cultivating *mawaddah wa rahmah*, and attaining the pleasure of God (Rohman, 2018, pp. 23–25).

The study further reveals that the apparent contradiction between biological desire and spiritual purity is not eliminated in either text but is instead integrated dialectically into a transformative harmony. Neither *Serat Centhini* nor *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun* advocates an ascetic rejection of human desire or a hedonistic liberation of desire without restraint. Rather, both propose models for governing desire in which sensuality becomes an essential dimension of spiritual maturation. Their principal difference lies in the semiotic mechanisms through which this integration is achieved. *Serat Centhini* accomplishes this harmony through aesthetic and syncretic strategies, employing literary symbolism, cosmological metaphors, and mystical discourse to unite bodily experience with the longing for divine union. *Kitab Qurrotul 'Uyun*, as a product of the Islamic scholarly tradition of the *pesantren*, achieves a comparable harmony through the ritualization and regulation of sexuality within the framework of *shari'ah*, situating

biological pleasure within the ethical, devotional, and moral responsibilities of marriage.

The most significant contribution of this study lies in identifying an epistemological convergence between these two texts. Although they originate from different cultural traditions, both regard sensuality as a legitimate dimension of human existence, provided that it is directed toward spiritual ends. In other words, both the Javanese intellectual tradition and the Islamic tradition of the Indonesian archipelago reject two opposing extremes: the denial of human desire on the one hand and its unrestricted indulgence on the other. Through distinct systems of signification, both texts demonstrate that intimate relationships can function as sites for the cultivation of moral character, spiritual maturity, and religious experience. Consequently, sensuality is understood not merely as the satisfaction of biological needs but as a means of sustaining harmony between body and soul, the temporal and the transcendent, and human experience and the pursuit of the Divine.

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