Research Journal in Advanced Humanities

RJAH

https://doi.org/10.58256/xcq1cw94

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RESEARCH ARTICLE **Section:** *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism*

Voices under constraint: Women's agency across three asian literary traditions

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ABSTRACT

This study examines relationships among bodily visibility, speech, and decision-making authority in Imruʾ al-Qays's Muʿallaqa, Serat Centhini, and Starkweather's English translation of Bidasari. Combining comparative close reading with reproducible corpus analysis, it investigates how female agency is represented across distinct literary traditions. The corpus comprises 200 Centhini stanzas from five consecutive pupuh and 3,309 Bidasari lines across six Songs, supplemented by Arabic textual images. Quantitative analysis identifies obligation and prohibition markers in Centhini and examines speech distribution across 78 quotation spans in two Bidasari scenes, distinguishing dialogue, inner speech, prayer, and ambiguous attribution. Thirty markers appear in 23 Centhini stanzas, with coverage reaching 34.3% in pupuh 191, exceeding the preceding four sections combined by 27.62 percentage points. Bidasari contributes 36.8% and 30.0% of dialogue tokens across the two scenes, while accounting for 51.0% of quoted tokens in the abuse scene. Findings demonstrate that narrative visibility and verbal participation do not necessarily establish authority. The Muʿallaqa privileges masculine recollection; Centhini maintains instructional hierarchies despite acknowledging emotional compatibility; and Bidasari foregrounds resistance without guaranteeing autonomous decisions. These findings establish a comparative framework linking textual representation, speech allocation, and authority while respecting linguistic and editorial differences.

KEYWORDS: comparative literature, corpus analysis, the body, narrative authority, Centhini, Bidasari

Research Journal in Advanced Humanities
Volume 7, Issue 4, 2026
ISSN: 2708-5945 (Print)
ISSN: 2708-5953 (Online)

ARTICLE HISTORY

Submitted: **29 July 2026**
Accepted: 14 **September 2026**
Published: 21 **October 2026**

HOW TO CITE

Asrina, Syarifudin, A., Nursida, I., Sulhi, Abidin, Z., Halimah, L., Widayati, M., & Pamungkas, O. Y. (2026). Voices under constraint: Women's agency across three asian literary traditions. *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities*, 7(4). https://doi.org/10.58256/xcq1cw94

Published in Nairobi, Kenya by Royallite Global, an imprint of Royallite Publishers Limited

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Introduction

The literary body connects beauty, vulnerability, and authority: who may approach, evaluate, refuse, or determine a relationship's outcome is simultaneously a narrative and ethical question. Imruʾ al-Qays's *Muʿallaqa* frames the beloved through recollection, *Serat Centhini* organises knowledge about partners through instruction, and *Bidasari* links beauty to abuse and royal restoration ("Bidasari," 2004; Imruʾ al-Qays, 1930; *Serat Centhini*, 1986). These contrasting arrangements invite comparison without presuming a uniform Arab, Javanese, or Malay morality. Scholarship on Kartini, the kebaya, women's speculative fiction, and Men Coblong similarly situates women's representation within specific social contexts (Allen, 2023; Chin, 2023; Pratidina & Pasaribu, 2023; Priyatna, 2023). The analytical challenge is therefore to distinguish a character's visibility from their capacity to influence narrative outcomes.

This distinction requires separating desire, speech, and narrative authority. Desire denotes an orientation towards intimacy, possession, or a relationship's continuation; narrative authority concerns the power to determine events and their evaluation. Research on composition, poetic criteria, metaphor, and poetics supports attention to the changing functions of literary motifs (Carpentieri, 2024; Gündüz, 2023; Nasser, 2022; Noy, 2025; Sperl, 2025), while Atwell (2023) demonstrates that bodily language also expresses *taqwā*, extending beyond erotic representation. Studies of *adab*, narrative function, poetic performance, and oration further position utterances within particular ethical and rhetorical contexts (Almutawa, 2023; Gubara & Wick, 2022; Jorgensen, 2023; Qutbuddin, 2024). Together, these perspectives caution against equating representation with authorial endorsement or extensive speech with control over its consequences.

Within Javanese and Indonesian scholarship, studies of incantations, women's education, and symbolic politics locate language at intersections of values and power (Pamungkas et al., 2023; Pamungkas, Ma'rifataini, et al., 2024; Pamungkas, Paresti, et al., 2024; Rahmawati et al., 2024). Research on relationships among people, environments, and animal representations likewise establishes the importance of contextual interpretation in Javanese sources (Jákl, 2022; van der Meij, 2022; Worsley, 2022), while Eka Guna Yasa et al. (2025) situate pregnancy knowledge in Old Javanese Śaiva sources within intellectual history. These contributions support reading bodily instruction as historically situated knowledge. A teacher's classifications cannot therefore be accepted as biological certainties, just as a restorative ending cannot be assumed to dismantle the structures enabling coercion.

Comparison also requires attention to textual transmission. Studies of Malay manuscript networks and circulation (Darmawan, 2025; Maulani, 2025; Yahya, 2025), historical lexical evidence (Hoogervorst, 2024), and translation's relationship with reading and instruction (Haroon, 2023; Iankovskaia, 2024; Kamiishi, 2025; Maftuhin, 2023; Ricci, 2023) demonstrate the importance of textual versions and mediation. Accordingly, the English *Bidasari* is examined as a particular version whose linguistic frequencies cannot be directly equated with those of the Javanese text. Comparison proceeds through narrative functions while distinguishing source-language evidence, editorial intervention, and translators' choices. This approach preserves the interpretive value of cross-textual analysis without treating translated language as transparent evidence of an original text or an entire cultural tradition.

Building on Hussein's (2025) quantification of rhetorical devices in 95 poems and Yuliawati's (2025) corpus analysis of images of women, this study combines close reading with narrowly defined, traceable textual measures. Its contribution lies in examining the relationships among bodily visibility, opportunities to speak, and authority over action while keeping these dimensions analytically distinct. It asks how bodily evaluation legitimises regulation, how speech is distributed, and how conflict resolution allocates decision-making power. Quantitative patterns are interpreted alongside scene-level evidence and counter-evidence to establish what speech accomplishes within each narrative. The resulting analysis investigates whether representational prominence translates into consequential action, while respecting differences among the texts and avoiding moral rankings of their associated cultures.

Methods

The study combines qualitative and quantitative analysis, grounding interpretation in close reading and using corpus measurement to examine textual distributions. Document analysis follows Morgan's (2022) emphasis on alignment among sources, questions, and limits of inference. The organisation of themes draws on Braun

and Clarke (2022, 2023) and Byrne's (2022) worked example, while lexical counting and speech attribution follow separate operational procedures. Frequency is therefore not treated as a measure of the validity of reflexively developed themes. Quantitative patterns are interpreted alongside speech context, speaker position, and consequences of action in identifiable scenes, connecting linguistic distributions with mechanisms governing bodies and narrative authority. Differences are reported as percentage-point contrasts, stanza-coverage ratios, and density ratios with explicit numerators and denominators. Comparisons remain confined to relevant corpora and units, without assuming linguistic equivalence across languages or versions.

Primary materials have identifiable editions and explicit textual boundaries. The Arabic source is Ḥasan al-Sandūbī's 1930 edition of *Dīwān Imriʾ al-Qays*, poem 51, chiefly printed pages 94–99; PDF numbering differs by two pages (Imruʾ al-Qays, 1930). The Javanese source is Kamajaya's transliteration, volume III, on Sastra.org; complete, consecutive pupuh 187–191 comprise 200 stanzas, distributed as 32, 44, 39, 50, and 35 respectively (*Serat Centhini*, 1986). *Bidasari* uses Starkweather's English translation in Project Gutenberg 7095, digitally released in 2004 and updated in 2020; the corpus covers Songs I–VI before THE END., excluding other stories ("Bidasari," 2004). Speech attribution examines two scenes selected through qualitative identification of conflict: A, lines 867–1110, covers solitude, abuse, and the fish's secret; B, lines 1823–1972, covers the royal encounter, refusal, and testimony about abuse. Line numbers follow the source file, including blank lines. All quotation spans were collected: 46 in A and 32 in B. Scene selection was purposive; within-scene collection was exhaustive. Selected images of the Malay Jawi text in Utrecht University's copy of Klinkert's (1886) edition were collated for corresponding sequences of action and speech. This scene-level collation neither equates tokens or line numbers nor establishes Klinkert as Starkweather's direct source.

Processing excluded website navigation, headings, footnotes, stanza numbers, and page markers from token denominators. Unicode NFC normalisation preserved spelling and diacritics. Tokens were letter sequences allowing internal apostrophes; hyphens separated tokens, and optional parenthesised Javanese prefixes were joined to the following word. The procedure yielded 4,385 Javanese and 25,825 English tokens. *Centhini* measurement used six explicit markers: *kudu* and *kêdah* for obligation; *aja*, *aywa*, *haywa*, and *ywa* for prohibition. Coverage divides stanzas containing at least one marker by all stanzas in a pupuh and multiplies by 100; density divides marker occurrences by all tokens and multiplies by 1,000. Thus, *kudu-kudu* contributes two occurrences but one marked stanza. Pupuh 191 was compared with 187–190 and additionally with 189–190 to assess the influence of the two unmarked pupuh. Alternative counts retaining hyphenated forms tested tokenisation sensitivity. The exploratory lexicon measures these six forms only, not all advice, imperatives, or norms.

Bidasari coding distinguished interpersonal dialogue, inner speech, prayer, and ambiguous spans through speech introductions and narrative continuity. Quotation spans are not speaking turns: interruptions such as *he said* can split an utterance. Speaker shares divide a speaker's dialogue tokens by all dialogue tokens in that scene. Ambiguous spans were excluded initially and reinstated in sensitivity analysis. AI-assisted attribution was checked against source context; no independent human coder was available, so intercoder reliability is not claimed. Two editorial adjustments affected only the analytical representation: disregarding a paragraph-continuation opening quotation mark at line 1097 and restoring a missing closing mark after the king's speech at line 1631. The source file remains unchanged. Integrity checks covered complete stanza sequences, unique identifiers, agreement between annotations and extracted text, and reconciliation of category totals with denominators. Neither p values nor confidence intervals were used: consecutive units are interdependent and lack a sampling design supporting population inference. Corpus boundaries, contextual checks, and sensitivity scenarios express uncertainty.

Supporting literature was purposively selected for theoretical, contextual, and methodological relevance across the five calendar years 2022–2026, using journal issue years. The bibliography contains 47 journal articles within this period, cited throughout the article, four classical sources ("Bidasari," 2004; Imruʾ al-Qays, 1930; Klinkert, 1886; *Serat Centhini*, 1986), and two Global Research Publication articles from the local collection, checked against publisher webpages (Khaeni & Pamungkas, 2024; Rifai & Pamungkas, 2025). Verification distinguished metadata agreement, journal indexing coverage, and individual article records. Titles and DOIs for 44 articles matched Crossref metadata; five further articles were checked through publisher webpages. The ten journals containing the 47 main articles were examined in Scopus Sources, with coverage matching

article issue years. Two articles were verified at EID level; 45 individual records remain unaudited. The Global Research Publication articles are supplementary and are not claimed to be Scopus-indexed. These distinctions preserve traceability without equating journal coverage with confirmation of every article record. Selection supports targeted analysis rather than a systematic review or exhaustive literature inventory.

Results

The two bounded digital corpora yielded 30,210 tokens. This total indicates processing volume; Javanese and English tokens remain analytically distinct. Section lengths in *Bidasari* are highly uneven: Song II contains 7,873 tokens, whereas Song V contains only 1,016. Raw frequencies therefore cannot establish relative intensity. In *Centhini*, metrical form also affects stanza length, so results are presented using both token and stanza denominators.

Table 1 Scope of the primary materials analysed

Source	Corpus boundaries	Textual unit	Tokens
Muʿallaqa	Printed pages 94–99	Images of the Arabic edition	Not counted
Centhini	Complete pupuh 187–191	200 stanzas	4,385
Bidasari	Complete Songs I–VI	3,309 nonblank lines	25,825
Bidasari scenes A and B	Subset of the corpus above	78 quotation spans	1,856
Bidasari in Klinkert's edition	Selected scene passages	Images of the Malay Jawi text	Not counted

Note: scene spans are not added again to corpus totals. Quoted tokens include dialogue, inner speech, prayer, and ambiguous attribution; only 1,553 tokens meet the definition of interpersonal dialogue. Source: primary-text processing and selected collation ("Bidasari," 2004; Imruʾ al-Qays, 1930; Klinkert, 1886; *Serat Centhini*, 1986).

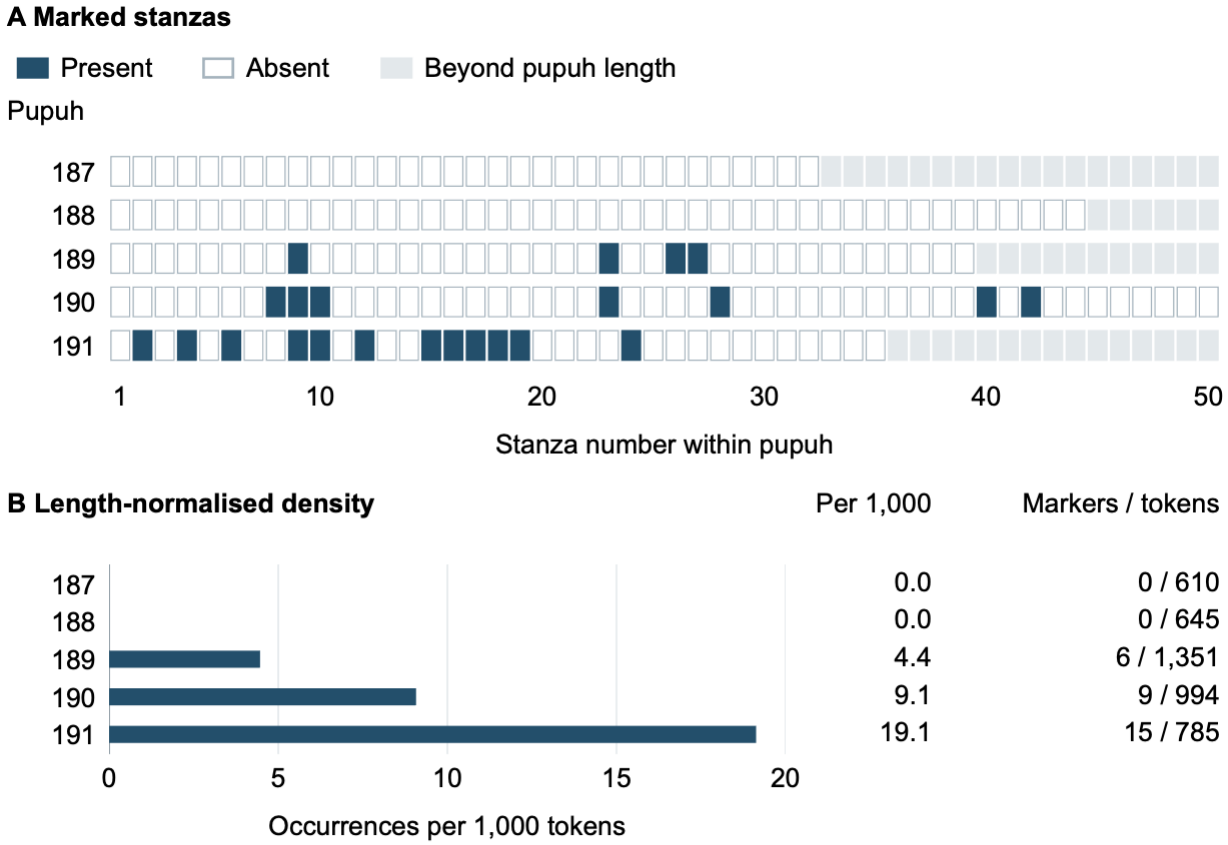
Concentration of Bodily Regulation in Centhini

The six *Centhini* markers occur 30 times in 23 of 200 stanzas, or 11.5%. Their distribution centres on pupuh 191, which contains 15 occurrences and 12 marker-bearing stanzas. Coverage is 34.3%, compared with 14.0% in pupuh 190 and 10.3% in pupuh 189. Pupuh 187 and 188 contain none of the exact forms in the lexicon. Differences in length do not eliminate this concentration: marker densities are 4.44, 9.05, and 19.11 per 1,000 tokens in pupuh 189, 190, and 191 respectively. These results locate explicit forms; they do not demonstrate a linear increase in a particular moral disposition.

Table 2 Markers of obligation and prohibition by pupuh

Pupuh	Stanzas	Tokens	Occurrences	Marked stanzas	Density per 1,000 tokens
187	32	610	0	0	0.00
188	44	645	0	0	0.00
189	39	1,351	6	4	4.44
190	50	994	9	7	9.05
191	35	785	15	12	19.11
Total	**200**	**4,385**	**30**	**23**	**6.84**

Note: a stanza may contain more than one marker. The counted forms are kudu, kêdah, aja, aywa, haywa, and ywa. Source: analysis of the transliteration (*Serat Centhini*, 1986).



Source: *Serat Centhini* (1986).

Zeros apply only to the six forms examined.

Figure 1 Locations of marker-bearing stanzas and density per 1,000 tokens. Panel A retains the sequence of all 200 stanzas; panel B adjusts for differences in text length. Grey cells indicate positions beyond a pupuh's length, not unmarked stanzas.

Markers of obligation and prohibition are concentrated in pupuh 191: 12 of its 35 stanzas contain markers, compared with 11 of 165 stanzas in pupuh 187–190. Coverage of 34.29% against 6.67% yields a difference of 27.62 percentage points and a ratio of 5.14; densities of 19.11 and 4.17 per 1,000 tokens yield a ratio of 4.59. Pupuh 191 comprises only 17.5% of all stanzas but contributes 50.0% of marker occurrences. Agreement between stanza-based and token-based normalisation shows that pupuh length alone cannot explain concentration. When the unmarked pupuh 187 and 188 are excluded, comparator coverage becomes 11 of 89 stanzas, or 12.36%; the difference from pupuh 191 remains 21.93 percentage points, with a coverage ratio of 2.77 and a density ratio of 2.99. The smaller contrast retains its direction, showing that the two zero counts do not determine the finding. Figure 1 preserves stanza sequence and differences in pupuh length; the figures describe distribution within the corpus, not historical development or causation.

Lexical concentration must be read alongside variation in function. *Kudu* in pupuh 191:2 directs men to observe, whereas 191:10 stresses patience; pupuh 190:28 combines a prohibition against excessive force with *kêdah saranta*. By contrast, *kudu* in 189:23 accompanies the rejection of a partner on bodily grounds, while *aywa* in 191:24 occurs in Cebolang's request that the teacher explain human origins (*Serat Centhini*, 1986). The concordance reveals functions of attentiveness, exclusion, technique, and inquiry, so the thirty occurrences cannot all be labelled expressions of care. Pupuh 188:1–12 situates partner selection within a network of ancestry, family, status, knowledge, skills, and occupation (*Serat Centhini*, 1986). Knowledge is addressed to men as evaluators; an asymmetry of perspective is established before the bodily catalogue is elaborated. The catalogue in 188:13–44 then connects bodily signs with women's character and suitability despite containing none of the six lexical markers (*Serat Centhini*, 1986). Absence of these markers therefore does not establish the absence of norms, just as high frequency does not determine an instruction's ethical value.

Centhini also places internal limits on the authority to classify. The phrases "mung ati paitannya" and "sênêng parênging wardaya" make emotional compatibility a basis for matching partners, positioning their

attributes as fallible guidance and allowing the teacher to acknowledge the limits of its application (*Serat Centhini*, 1986, pupuh 189:3–4). Nevertheless, women's obligations and generalisations about character in pupuh 189:10–18 and 26–31 preserve hierarchy (*Serat Centhini*, 1986); recognition of both parties' feelings supports reciprocity, rather than equality of rights or voice or the full modern concept of consent. Distinctions among a partner's states and wishes in pupuh 191:2–7 require observation and adjustment, but may serve either care or the success of the party directing the relationship (*Serat Centhini*, 1986). Battle metaphors in 189:32–39 and 191:8–15 emphasise control, while instructions to exercise patience restrain haste (*Serat Centhini*, 1986). The turn towards human origins and self-understanding in 191:21–23 broadens the function of bodily relations without removing the catalogue or the hierarchy of instruction (*Serat Centhini*, 1986). The tension among attentiveness, control, and knowledge must therefore remain visible: an exclusively mystical reading obscures relational problems, whereas an exclusively technical reading removes their intellectual framing.

Unequal Speech and Decision Making in Bidasari

Scene A contains 41 dialogue spans comprising 726 tokens; scene B contains 28 spans comprising 827 tokens. Bidasari contributes 267 tokens, or 36.8% of dialogue in A, compared with the queen's 304 tokens, or 41.9%. Other characters account for the remainder. In scene B, the king accounts for 579 tokens, or 70.0%, and Bidasari for 248 tokens, or 30.0%. These denominators allow the distribution of speech to be compared within each scene despite differences in scene length and character composition. No tests treating individual words as independent observations were used.

Table 3 Distribution of interpersonal dialogue tokens

Speaker	Scene A tokens	Share in A	Scene B tokens	Share in B
Bidasari	267	36.8%	248	30.0%
Queen	304	41.9%	0	0.0%
King	32	4.4%	579	70.0%
Attendants	105	14.5%	0	0.0%
Adoptive father	18	2.5%	0	0.0%
Total	**726**	**100.0%**	**827**	**100.0%**

Note: rounded components in A sum to 100.1%. Scene A comprises lines 867–1110; B comprises lines 1823–1972. Source: contextual attribution in the translation ("Bidasari," 2004).

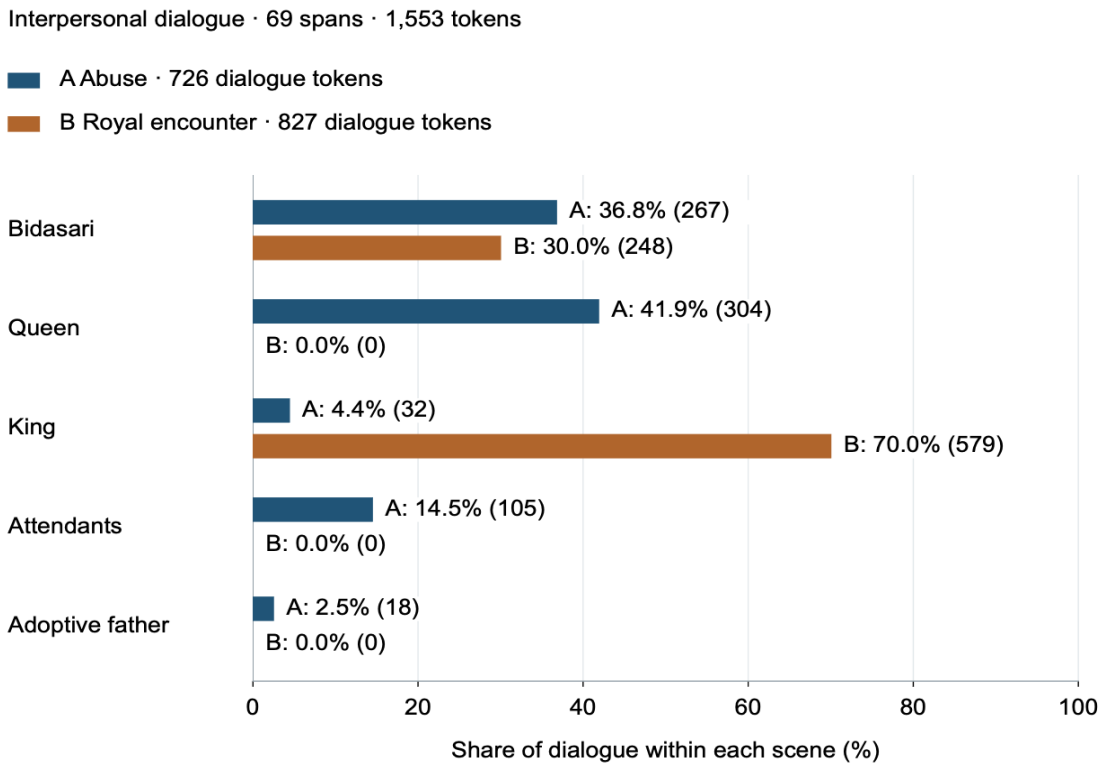


Figure 2 Distribution of interpersonal dialogue by speaker in two Bidasari scenes. Paired bars compare scene A (abuse) and scene B (royal encounter) on a common percentage scale. Labels report shares and token counts using each scene's denominator. Zero indicates no dialogue in the selected scene.

The dialogue imbalance reveals two different configurations of power. In scene A, the queen exceeds Bidasari by 37 tokens, equivalent to 5.10 percentage points and a ratio of 1.14; in B, the king's advantage reaches 331 tokens, equivalent to 40.02 points and a ratio of 2.33. Abuse in A occurs when the victim's speech volume is relatively close to the perpetrator's, whereas the encounter in B gives the king considerably more space to court, investigate, doubt, and promise redress. Differences in the composition of characters preclude interpreting this contrast as an effect of time or a personal change in Bidasari. Her requests to return home, protests against the queen's treatment, and explanation of the fish's secret demonstrate that she has a voice, but do not end the queen's control; dialogue share is therefore neither a consent score nor a measure of freedom. Song II connects beauty with a threat to the queen's position, abuse, the concealment of the victim, and false information ("Bidasari," 2004, lines 870–1113). The narrator's sympathy brings bodily attractiveness and vulnerability together within the politics of the royal household. Explanations that conceal suffering obstruct assistance, while the narrator gives readers access to an injustice still unknown to other characters ("Bidasari," 2004, lines 1025–1082). The queen's taking and wearing of the fish, and the change in the victim's condition when it is returned to water, demonstrate how control over life can operate without physical proximity ("Bidasari," 2004, lines 1043–1110). The fish's fantastic function rests on the narrative consequences of its transfer, not on a physiological claim.

The sequence of actions clarifies the limits of Bidasari's influence through speech. She moves away, offers jewellery to persuade the visitor to leave, and throws water; the king responds with affection and an assertion of rank ("Bidasari," 2004, lines 1823–1869). The disparity of 579 to 248 dialogue tokens thus encompasses concrete acts of refusal, preventing the encounter from being read as mutually welcomed courtship from the outset. Bidasari's concern that she has behaved discourteously after recognising the king shows how status changes her assessment of her own refusal ("Bidasari," 2004, lines 1870–1874). The promise of discussion with her parents directs the relationship towards marital legitimacy; fear, recognition of authority, and family arrangements nevertheless remain distinct stages. When Bidasari reveals her fear of the queen, the king initially defends his consort and invites Bidasari to approach as proof of the queen's kindness. After Bidasari insists on the truth of her account, he accepts her testimony and offers redress, but maintains his intention to pursue the relationship despite her request to remain an ordinary maiden ("Bidasari," 2004, lines 1910–1969). A change in belief accompanies continuity of control: the king does not invariably disregard the victim's voice, yet accepting her testimony does not grant Bidasari equal authority over her future. His rebuke of violence also accompanies his rejection of the queen's objection to his relationship with Bidasari ("Bidasari," 2004, lines 2240–2283). At the narrative's close, recognition of Bidasari's family and status continues to coexist with her husband's authority ("Bidasari," 2004, lines 3540–3545). Bonds with siblings and adoptive parents are retained, while decisions concerning the character's whereabouts remain within familial and royal hierarchies. Restoration resolves particular suffering without vindicating every action of the rescuer or eliminating inequality.

Collation with the Malay text supports the reading of actions while limiting the transfer of quantitative findings. Klinkert's edition contains the request to return home and the queen's prohibition on page 298, jealousy and abuse on pages 299–300, and the connection between Bidasari's life spirit and the fish on page 306. In the encounter with the king, attempts to withdraw appear on pages 340–341, the offer of valuables on pages 341–343, and the throwing of water on page 343 (Klinkert, 1886). Narrative correspondences with English scenes A and B show that the heroine's objections are not dependent on a single English formulation ("Bidasari," 2004). Shared motifs, however, do not establish equivalent speech lengths. The attendants' religious criticism on page 301 is more explicit than the corresponding English passage, indicating that mediation across versions affects representation. Collation supports the relationship among refusal, control of information, and action; percentages and ratios remain specific to the English version counted and cannot be transferred into measures of the Malay text.

Sensitivity to Definitions of Speech

Two spans have uncertain speech attribution, comprising nine and sixteen tokens respectively. When both are

included as dialogue, Bidasari's share becomes 37.6% in A and 31.3% in B. Her relative position against the principal royal speaker does not change. Alternative tokenisation retaining hyphenated forms yields shares of 36.7% and 30.0%, indicating that the dialogue distribution does not depend on splitting English compounds. In the Javanese corpus, the alternative denominator falls from 4,385 to 4,311 tokens; stanza units and coverage of 23 out of 200 stanzas remain unchanged. Stanza-based metrics therefore provide a check independent of token length.

A larger change occurs when all quotations, including prayer and inner speech, are combined. Bidasari's share reaches 477 of 936 tokens, or 51.0%, in A and 341 of 920, or 37.1%, in B. This finding qualifies any conclusion about who speaks most. Bidasari receives substantial space for inward suffering and prayer, particularly when she cannot influence her interlocutor. Combining these forms with dialogue changes the answer for scene A. That difference is itself an analytical finding: readers' access to a character's experience exceeds the character's access to decisions made by others.

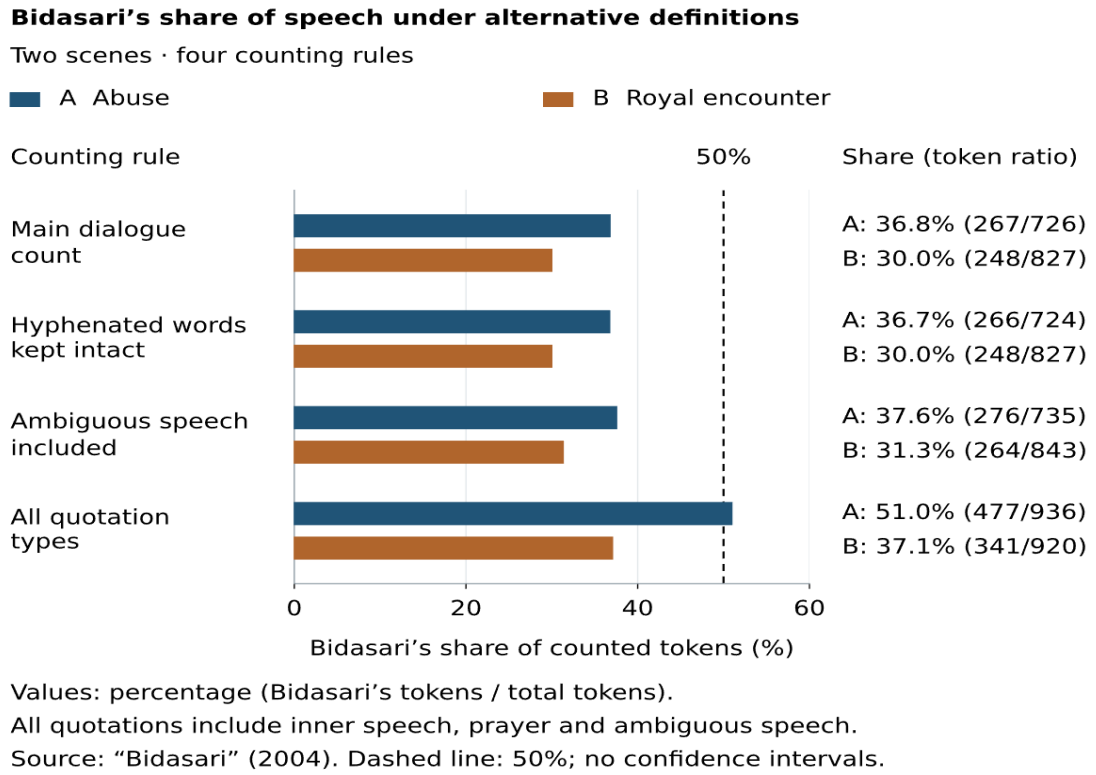


Figure 3 Sensitivity of Bidasari's share to four counting definitions. Paired bars compare scenes A and B on a common scale; the dashed line marks 50%. The value column reports percentages and numerator/denominator token counts. These descriptive comparisons are not confidence intervals or measures of authority.

Decomposing the change in scene A provides a sharper check than comparing final percentages alone. Combining all quotations adds 210 tokens beyond dialogue, all attributed to Bidasari: 41 tokens of inner speech, 160 of prayer, and nine with ambiguous attribution. This accounts for the increase of 14.18 percentage points in her share. In scene B, the additional 93 tokens also belong entirely to Bidasari, comprising 77 of inner speech and 16 with ambiguous attribution, yielding an increase of 7.08 points. The increase in A does not mean that the queen loses control over action; it means that readers receive greater access to the victim's experience, not all of which is addressed to the perpetrator as dialogue.

Changes arising from the definition of quoted speech greatly exceed those caused by technical choices in tokenisation. Retaining hyphenated forms lowers Bidasari's dialogue share in A by approximately 0.04 percentage points and leaves B unchanged; including ambiguous attribution raises A by 0.77 points and B by 1.33 points. The conclusion that Bidasari does not dominate dialogue therefore survives the technical and ambiguous-attribution checks, whereas the conclusion that she does not dominate all represented speech fails for A. This distinction separates robust findings from claims requiring qualification. Changing explicit rules tests those claims.

Table 4 Magnitudes of contrasts and alternative comparisons

Contrast	Focal and comparator values	Difference	Ratio
Stanza coverage in 191 versus 187–190	12/35 and 11/165	+27.62 percentage points	5.14
Stanza coverage in 191 versus 189–190	12/35 and 11/89	+21.93 percentage points	2.77
Density in 191 versus 187–190	15/785 and 15/3,600	+14.94 per 1,000 tokens	4.59
Density in 191 versus 189–190	15/785 and 15/2,345	+12.71 per 1,000 tokens	2.99
Queen versus Bidasari dialogue in A	304/726 and 267/726	+5.10 percentage points	1.14
King versus Bidasari dialogue in B	579/827 and 248/827	+40.02 percentage points	2.33

Note: each ratio divides the focal value by the comparator; it is not a causal effect measure. Coverage and dialogue differences use percentage points, whereas density differences use occurrences per 1,000 tokens. Source: recalculation of the data ("Bidasari," 2004; *Serat Centhini*, 1986).

Framing Women's Objections in the Muʿallaqa

The *Muʿallaqa* opens with the invitation "qifā nabki min dhikrā ḥabībin wa-manzili", to stop and weep at the traces of the beloved's dwelling (Imruʾ al-Qays, 1930, p. 94). The persona confronts loss before boasting of success. He controls the arrangement of recollection, although he cannot erase the beloved's absence. His authority here consists of rhetorical control over the presentation of experience, not evidence of unrestricted social power.

The expression "fa-mithliki ḥublā qad ṭaraqtu wa-murḍiʿin" introduces pregnant or nursing women into the persona's claims of encounters (Imruʾ al-Qays, 1930, p. 96). Reproductive circumstances and domestic attachments become part of his magnification of success. Yet the claim comes from a speaker invested in his own self-presentation. The verse supports analysis of a narrative strategy, not generalisation about the sexual norms of pre-Islamic society.

References to enclosed spaces, guards bypassed, and threats heighten the value of the persona's success (Imruʾ al-Qays, 1930, pp. 97–98). Obstacles are necessary for the encounter to appear difficult to achieve. Pride in crossing boundaries consequently depends on acknowledging that those boundaries exist. The scene demonstrates the rhetorical function of prohibition, not straightforward evidence of a social environment without restrictions.

A woman's objection on page 98 qualifies the assumption that she is entirely silent (Imruʾ al-Qays, 1930). Her words, however, remain selected and situated within the persona's recollection. Readers are given no independent counter-narrative of the encounter. This finding separates the presence of speech from the authority to narrate: quotation makes a voice available, while the principal speaker controls the reasons for its appearance and what follows it.

Descriptions of the neck, hair, and other bodily features on pages 98–99 construct beauty through comparisons with the surrounding world (Imruʾ al-Qays, 1930). The persona selects both the parts displayed and the perspective from which they are evaluated. Objectification here refers to the division of the body into objects of a gaze within the structure of utterance. The meaning of each comparison must still be examined in its expressive context; references to animals or objects do not automatically carry a single, fixed value.

The Arabic reading identifies a relationship among loss, control over recollection, and self-aggrandisement. The persona can weep, court, complain, and boast of courage within the same sequence. This complexity disappears if he is described simply as a champion of sexual freedom or an emblem of moral wrongdoing. At the level of evidence, page 94 establishes dependence on recollection, page 96 presents claims of conquest, and page 98 gives an objection that remains framed by the speaker (Imruʾ al-Qays, 1930). Their relationship supports a

reading of rhetorical authority that is emotionally variable. The sequence is nevertheless insufficient to establish social acceptance of his actions or the legal norms of pre-Islamic society.

Integrating Textual Evidence and Quantitative Measures

The combined evidence reveals three ways in which authority is organised. The *Muʿallaqa* centres recollection on a persona who selects which encounters and objections to present. *Centhini* positions the teacher as the holder of a language of classification and practical instruction. *Bidasari* gives readers access to suffering through narration, dialogue, prayer, and inner speech, while the heroine's practical authority remains limited ("Bidasari," 2004; Imruʾ al-Qays, 1930; *Serat Centhini*, 1986). These formal differences explain the findings more precisely than classifying the three traditions as permissive, spiritual, or decorous. Genre shapes how a voice appears, but it cannot supply a moral verdict before a scene is examined.

Quantitative measures improve the precision of qualitative claims in two respects. The absence of the six markers in pupuh 188 cannot invalidate the normative character of its catalogue of women. Conversely, their concentration in pupuh 191 directs attention towards the regulation of technique and adjustment, beyond the readily quotable catalogue. In *Bidasari*, the heroine's 267 dialogue tokens in the abuse scene rule out describing the victim as entirely voiceless. Her appeals nevertheless fail to end the abuse. Numerical evidence and evidence of action do not substitute for one another; together, they determine the precision of the terms used to explain power.

Table 5 Integration of indicators and contextual interpretation

Corpus	Measured or located evidence	Contextual check	Supported inference
Muʿallaqa	A woman's objection on page 98	Her words are quoted within the persona's recollection	Having a voice does not confer equal authority to narrate
Centhini	15 of 30 markers occur in pupuh 191	Instructions regulate observation and technique while also requesting explanation from the teacher	Concentration locates explicit regulation with varied functions
Bidasari A	Bidasari contributes 267 of 726 dialogue tokens	Requests to return home meet prohibition and abuse	Substantial speech does not guarantee that requests are honoured
Bidasari B	The king contributes 579 of 827 dialogue tokens	Promises of protection follow refusal and doubt about testimony	Extensive speech accompanies the position of deciding how to respond in the scene

Note: the Arabic evidence is qualitative; its units are not equated with those of the two digital corpora. Source: integration of quantitative results and close reading ("Bidasari," 2004; Imruʾ al-Qays, 1930; *Serat Centhini*, 1986).

The change produced by including inner speech and prayer distinguishes representational access from interactional influence. A narrator may give a character considerable space to communicate experience to readers without giving that character an equal capacity to change another's actions. In scene A, Bidasari exceeds half of all quoted tokens but remains under the queen's control. In scene B, the king has approximately 2.33 times as many dialogue tokens as Bidasari. This ratio describes the distribution of opportunities to speak within the scene, not the magnitude of social power. Power is further evidenced by the disregard of boundaries, the evaluation of testimony, and the decision to maintain the relationship.

Evidence that qualifies the thesis is retained throughout the results. The queen is not the only substantial speaker in A; Bidasari gains a majority of tokens once prayer and inner speech are included. The king does not invariably deny the victim's experience, since he eventually accepts her testimony. The teacher does more than catalogue bodies, because emotional compatibility qualifies the list. The Arabic persona does not always claim control free of loss, since the poem begins with tears at a former dwelling. These four qualifications make the relationship between voice and power a question of function and consequence requiring examination, rather than a conclusion settled before the sources are read ("Bidasari," 2004; Imruʾ al-Qays, 1930; *Serat Centhini*, 1986).

Discussion

This study examines how bodily visibility and opportunities to speak relate to decision-making authority and tests that interpretation through textual measurement. Marker concentration in pupuh 191 persists after length normalisation, while Bidasari's share in scene A rises from 36.8% to 51.0% when inner speech and prayer are included. Yuliawati (2025) uses frequency and collocation to trace changing images of women in *Manglé*; the present study extends this methodological question by testing the fit between a quantitative indicator and the kind of authority inferred from it. Hussein's (2025) statistical treatment of rhetorical devices in Arabic poetry likewise provides a point of comparison for measuring textual features, but does not justify combining Arabic, Javanese, and English units into a single moral scale. Consistent with methodological accounts of analytical coherence, coding decisions need to be explained in relation to the questions and assumptions informing them (Braun & Clarke, 2022, 2023; Byrne, 2022). The article's contribution lies in a verifiable qualification of claims: extensive speech is insufficient evidence of equality, while the absence of lexical markers is insufficient evidence of an absence of regulation. Because the units were not randomly sampled, the magnitude of each contrast describes the organisation of the corpus examined, rather than estimating a causal relationship within a society. The catalogue in pupuh 188 contains none of the six counted markers yet still positions women as objects of evaluation; conversely, pupuh 191 contributes half of all marker occurrences while comprising only 17.5% of the stanzas. Pamungkas et al. (2023) situate incantations at the intersection of symbolism, education, and the dissemination of Islam, while their research on the significance of incantations and symbolic politics broadens attention to the cultural functions of texts (Pamungkas, Ma'rifataini, et al., 2024; Pamungkas, Paresti, et al., 2024). The present findings engage that concern through a more critical question: instruction in sensitivity towards a partner may coexist with the teacher's entitlement to classify bodies. Rahmawati et al. (2024) identify representations of feminism and educational values in four novels by Ki Padmasusastra; reciprocity in *Centhini* offers a point of comparison, although differences of genre and period prevent the findings from being equated. The phrases concerning emotional compatibility limit the catalogue's absolute authority without necessarily removing the asymmetry between evaluator and evaluated. Eka Guna Yasa et al.'s (2025) study of pregnancy knowledge in Old Javanese sources reinforces the need to situate bodily categories within their intellectual contexts. Meanwhile, Rifai and Pamungkas's (2025) discussion of solidarity in Banyumasan stories directs the assessment of values towards characters' actions. The study thus connects educational functions with questions of power, showing why recognising cultural value should not foreclose criticism of how authority is distributed. In *Bidasari*, the clearest inequality concerns the relationship between speech and response, rather than whether a woman has a voice at all. The queen's advantage over Bidasari in scene A is only 5.10 percentage points, whereas the king's advantage in scene B reaches 40.02 points; both scenes nevertheless show the victim's limited ability to establish the boundaries of a relationship. Pratidina and Pasaribu (2023) find that two Kartini films retain an image of patriarchal society while opening space for collective efforts to question it. Allen (2023) reads Men Coblong's words as a means of everyday agency. *Bidasari* does not negate that possibility, but identifies a condition requiring examination: a speaker may object without being able to constrain an interlocutor's actions. The king accepts her testimony about abuse yet maintains his intention to pursue the relationship when she asks to remain an ordinary maiden. Agency is therefore partial and depends on the matter being decided. Mukherjee (2025) shows that moral tales about beautiful women can also contain ethnic and cultural tensions, while Wieringa et al. (2024) place Malay romances within a broader account of narrative functions. Swastika's (2023) attention to sovereignty within domestic space likewise helps explain control over access to the palace. The findings clarify how protection of a victim and the concentration of decision-making authority in a ruler can occur within the same narrative sequence.

Comparison of the *Muʿallaqa* with the two digital corpora shows that authority can operate before an action is narrated, through the selection of memories and the framing of voices made available to listeners. The woman's objection on page 98 appears within the persona's discourse, and its presence therefore supplies no independent counter-narrative. Jorgensen's (2023) work on poetic performance and Qutbuddin's (2024) on oration help explain the orientation of speech towards an audience; Naaman's (2023) analysis of literary controversy emphasises the need to situate a speaker's reputation and claims within their contested context. Kelly's (2026) study of Druze women's *qaṣīdah* demonstrates the diversity of speaking positions within Arabic traditions, while Marzolph (2023) traces transformations of a frame tale through evidence from textual history.

Similarities among the crossing of spaces in the *Muʿallaqa*, the teacher's authority in *Centhini*, and palace access in *Bidasari* are consequently interpreted correspondences in mechanisms, not evidence of an established line of transmission. Khaeni and Pamungkas (2024) examine human–animal relationships in *Inyik Balang*, and Duile (2022) demonstrates the plurality of tiger ecologies in two Indonesian novels. These comparisons resist assigning a single meaning to animals: the fish in *Bidasari* specifically becomes a means of transferring control over life through taking, wearing, and returning it. The comparative contribution thus lies in explaining how power operates within each narrative form while preserving differences in the types of evidence and their historical contexts.

The findings derive their strength from traceable units and alternative specifications, while their reach is limited by scene selection, lexical coverage, and editorial mediation. Tokenisation changes Bidasari's share by less than 0.04 percentage points in scene A, whereas combining all quotations raises it by 14.18 points. The difference in magnitude shows that the conceptual definition of speech matters more here than the treatment of hyphens. Selected collation supports several motifs of refusal (Klinkert, 1886), but the stability of the counts still requires independent verification of attribution. Morgan's (2022) emphasis on source suitability in document analysis remains relevant to assessing what the evidence can sustain. Studies of translation practices remind us that movement between languages helps constitute the text being read (Haroon, 2023; Kamiishi, 2025; Maftuhin, 2023; Ricci, 2023); Jaelani's (2024) research on colonial representation sharpens the question of the representer's position without establishing that Starkweather introduced any particular distortion. Similarly, the debates on sexuality during the Reformasi period examined by Udasmoro (2025) and the thinking on women's rights studied by Amini (2025) belong to their respective historical circumstances. Further research should therefore test the same patterns in non-intimate scenes, other Malay editions, and passages following Bidasari's change in status, with unit definitions and attribution rules remaining open to audit.

Conclusion

This study shows that bodily visibility, speech, and authority depend on how narratives organise evaluation and the consequences of action. Abundant speech does not guarantee autonomy, and normative-marker frequency does not directly measure care or oppression. Framed objections in the *Muʿallaqa*, instructional authority in *Centhini*, and control over palace access and decisions in *Bidasari* reveal distinct mechanisms requiring a distinction between voice and authority. The persistence of *Centhini* marker concentration under alternative comparisons, and changes in Bidasari's share when inner speech and prayer are included, confirm that textual measures gain meaning through context and consequences. The analytical generalisation is that narrative agency must be assessed through the relationship between opportunities to speak and the capacity to influence decisions, rather than representational volume alone.

Comparative literary research should combine traceable measurement and contextual reading to distinguish representational space, speech functions, and interactional influence. Findings are limited by five *Centhini* pupuh, two purposive *Bidasari* scenes, English translation, selected Malay collation, and coding not yet independently validated by a human reader. They represent neither entire works nor Arab, Javanese, and Malay morality. Future research should prioritise a second reader's attribution checks, extend collation across Malay editions and analysis to non-intimate scenes, and examine passages following Bidasari's change in status. These steps would establish which patterns persist across scenes and versions while distinguishing genre, character position, and translation effects.

Declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Bibliographic details and access links for the primary sources are provided in the reference list. The derived coding data and analysis scripts have not been deposited in a public repository.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable. The study analyses published literary texts and involves no human participants, personal data, or animal research.

Consent for publication.

Not applicable. The manuscript contains no identifiable information from research participants.

Use of generative artificial intelligence.

OpenAI ChatGPT/Codex assisted with drafting, English translation and editing, literature searches and reference checks, corpus processing, initial speech attribution, analytical scripting, figure preparation, and document formatting. AI-assisted attribution does not constitute independent human validation; no second-reader validation was conducted. The authors remain responsible for the final text, source accuracy, interpretations, and methodological claims.

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