

## THE AESTHETIC OF DHARMA: LITERARY PATHWAYS TO VIRTUE IN HINDU TEXTUAL TRADITIONS OF BALI

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### Abstract :

This study explores the aesthetic of dharma as manifested in Balinese Hindu literary traditions, particularly in classical works such as Kakawin Arjunawiwaha and Geguritan Dharma Prawerti. Through a hermeneutic and qualitative textual analysis, this paper argues that Balinese literature functions not only as an artistic expression but also as a moral-spiritual pedagogy that shapes character and consciousness. The synthesis of beauty (sundaram), goodness (śivam), and truth (satyam) creates an aesthetic path toward ethical and spiritual realization. The findings show that Balinese Hindu literature embodies dharma through emotional depth (rasa), symbolic structure, and ethical narrative, enabling readers to internalize virtue through aesthetic experience.

**Key Words :** Dharma, Aesthetic, Balinese Literature, Virtue, Hindu Culture

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### 1. Introduction

Balinese Hindu literature represents a living dialogue between art, morality, and spirituality, where aesthetic creation becomes an act of devotion. Rooted in the Sanskritic heritage of India yet reinterpreted through the Balinese sense of taksu—a divine inspiration that animates artistic expression—it transforms universal Hindu values into locally embodied experiences of beauty. In this process, dharma—as righteousness, moral order, and cosmic harmony—emerges not merely as a philosophical abstraction but as an artistic principle woven intricately into the structure of poetic language, rhythm, and narrative symbolism. The act of writing or reciting thus mirrors the act of worship, where the aesthetic form (rupa) becomes a vessel for spiritual essence (tattva).

In the context of Bali's living cultural ecology, literature transcends the boundaries of textuality. It is not limited to written manuscripts but exists dynamically through performance, ritual recitation, and communal enactment. Kakawin Arjunawiwaha, for example, narrates Arjuna's journey toward self-mastery and divine union, reflecting the path of yoga as both poetic and moral discipline. Geguritan Dharma Prawerti, on the other hand, articulates ethical instruction through vernacular verse, transforming philosophical ideals into accessible moral songs that resonate with everyday life. Both texts reveal that poetry (kawi) in Balinese Hindu tradition functions as adhyātma-śikṣā—a form of spiritual education that guides individuals toward śuddhi (purity) and mukti (liberation).

This integration of art and dharma illustrates a unique Balinese worldview in which aesthetics becomes ethics, and ethics becomes aesthetics. The beauty of poetic composition (sundaram) is inseparable from the pursuit of truth (satyam) and goodness (śivam). Through the rhythm

of verse, the resonance of sound, and the moral weight of narrative, Balinese Hindu literature embodies a theology of balance—between body and soul, human and divine, microcosm and macrocosm.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to examine how the aesthetic form of Balinese Hindu literature operates as a pathway to virtue, uniting moral instruction with emotional refinement and theological reflection. By analyzing selected literary texts, this study seeks to reveal how beauty functions as an instrument of ethical transformation and how *taksu*, as the spirit of creativity, enables the realization of *dharma* through artistic expression. In doing so, it contributes to a broader understanding of literature as sacred praxis—an ongoing dialogue between textual beauty and moral awakening in the Balinese Hindu tradition.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Dharma and Aesthetic Philosophy

In Hindu philosophical discourse, aesthetics and ethics are inseparable dimensions of the sacred. The classical triad of *satyam*, *śivam*, *sundaram*—truth, goodness, and beauty—forms not only a metaphysical doctrine but also a theological foundation for artistic creation (Radhakrishnan, 1956). Within this framework, beauty (*sundaram*) is not mere sensory pleasure but an expression of the divine principle of order (*ṛta*) that unites moral and cosmic harmony. Art, therefore, becomes an ethical act—an extension of *dharma* into the sensory and emotional world.

The theory of *rasa* articulated in Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (circa 200 BCE) and elaborated by Abhinavagupta (10th century) describes aesthetic experience as a means to spiritual bliss (*ānanda*). The evocation of refined emotions—such as compassion (*karuṇā*), heroism (*vīra*), and tranquility (*śānta*)—purifies human consciousness, guiding the individual toward self-realization. Abhinavagupta's view that *rasa* is Brahman encapsulates the sacred purpose of art: through feeling, one intuitively truth.

In the Balinese context, this philosophical synthesis manifests in what local thinkers call *rasa dharma*—the emotional embodiment of moral truth. Balinese scholars such as I Gusti Ngurah Bagus (1980) highlight that aesthetic refinement in literature reflects the island's integration of *tattva* (metaphysical knowledge), *susila* (ethics), and *upacara* (ritual practice). Meanwhile, Wayan Suteja Neka (2001) interprets art and literature as channels through which *taksu*, or divine inspiration, descends into human creativity. The experience of beauty (*rasa*) becomes simultaneously a religious and ethical experience, fostering empathy, devotion, and contemplation.

Moreover, the Balinese aesthetic system aligns with the theological principle of *Tri Hita Karana*—the three harmonies between humans, nature, and the divine. In literary creation, this triadic relationship is realized through the harmony of thought (*manacika*), word (*wacika*), and deed (*kayika*), echoing the doctrine of *Tri Kaya Parisudha*. Thus, *rasa dharma* functions as a bridge between aesthetic enjoyment and moral discipline, embodying a distinctly Balinese vision of sacred art where beauty itself becomes a pathway to virtue.

## 2.2. Balinese Hindu Literature as Moral Pedagogy

Balinese Hindu literature has long served as a vehicle of moral and spiritual education. It transmits ethical principles through poetic language, performance, and metaphor. The *Kakawin Arjunawiwaha*, composed by Mpu Kanwa in the 11th century, occupies a central place in Balinese literary curricula and ritual recitations. Although originating from the Javanese court, its deep adoption into Balinese culture exemplifies the syncretic vitality of Hindu literature in Bali. Arjuna's journey in the *kakawin*—his ascetic meditation, trials of temptation, and divine reward—mirrors the inner struggle of humanity to conquer desire and realize *moksha* (liberation). The text thus transforms an epic tale into ethical allegory, where self-discipline (*tapa*), devotion (*bhakti*), and detachment (*vairāgya*) become aesthetic and moral ideals simultaneously.

Complementing this is *Geguritan Dharma Prawerti*, a vernacular poetic work that distills the same ethical wisdom into rhythmic, melodic, and easily comprehensible form. As Korn (1932) observed, such *geguritan* texts function as mirrors of social morality—oral and performative scriptures that educate the heart through sound and emotion. The *Geguritan Dharma Prawerti* teaches *śīla* (moral conduct), *satyam* (truthfulness), and *dayā* (compassion) in ways that resonate with both common villagers and learned priests. As Putra (2018) elaborates, the repetition and cadence of *gegitan* language ensure that moral values are internalized through emotional rhythm, not abstract reasoning.

In this sense, Balinese Hindu literature performs a dual function: it entertains through beauty and enlightens through virtue. It exemplifies what Geertz (1973) described as a “model of reality and model for reality.” Literature reflects the moral world while simultaneously shaping it—encoding cultural ideals within artistic forms. Each poetic performance becomes an ethical act, a form of *yajña* (sacrifice) that renews social harmony through shared emotion.

This interweaving of artistic pleasure and moral pedagogy distinguishes Balinese Hindu literature as a unique theological phenomenon. The poet (*kawi*) is not merely an artist but a spiritual guide, a *guru loka* who awakens *dharma* through aesthetic insight. In the process, literature becomes a living scripture (*śruti desa kala patra*)—adapted to time, place, and circumstance, yet eternally rooted in divine truth. Through the beauty of *kawi* and the sincerity of *rasa*, Balinese Hindu literature continues to nurture ethical consciousness and preserve the sacred equilibrium of Balinese life.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive design integrated with a hermeneutic textual approach. The qualitative paradigm is appropriate for exploring meaning, symbolism, and cultural values embedded within literary works, especially those with religious and philosophical depth. Through this approach, the study seeks to interpret Balinese Hindu literature not merely as a textual artifact but as a living medium of ethical and spiritual expression.

The hermeneutic method emphasizes the dialogue between text and context, enabling the researcher to uncover layers of meaning related to dharma, rasa, and aesthetic experience. Texts are approached as dynamic systems of symbols that communicate theological insight and ethical guidance. This interpretive reading involves multiple levels of analysis: (1) literal understanding of narrative and diction, (2) symbolic interpretation of motifs and metaphors, and (3) theological reflection on how literary form mediates virtue and spiritual realization.

The interpretive process follows Ricoeur's (1976) notion of "the hermeneutic arc," which moves from understanding to explanation and back to understanding with greater depth. Thus, meaning is not fixed but continuously reinterpreted through engagement with cultural, ritual, and linguistic contexts. The study also integrates principles of aesthetic hermeneutics, recognizing that beauty (*sundaram*) in Balinese texts is a vehicle for dharma (ethical truth) and *tattva* (metaphysical insight).

Ultimately, this design aims to reveal how aesthetic forms—such as poetic structure, rhythm, and imagery—embody moral philosophy and spiritual awareness. The qualitative descriptive-hermeneutic model allows a nuanced reading that honors both the artistic autonomy of the text and its embedded religious function within Balinese Hindu tradition.

### 3.2. Sources of Data

The research draws upon a combination of primary and secondary data sources, reflecting both textual and contextual perspectives.

Primary data consist of selected canonical and vernacular Balinese Hindu texts that exemplify the aesthetic of dharma:

- Kakawin Arjunawiwaha, which illustrates the spiritual discipline and heroic virtue of Arjuna as an allegory of moral awakening.
- Geguritan Dharma Prawerti, a vernacular poetic composition that transmits ethical instruction through melodious verse.
- Kidung Rare Angon, a devotional song portraying innocence and purity as paths toward divine connection.

These works were chosen for their prominence in Balinese Hindu education, ritual recitation, and cultural transmission, ensuring that the study reflects living traditions rather than merely literary history.

Secondary data include classical aesthetic theories from India such as Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* and Abhinavagupta's *Dhvanyāloka*, which provide philosophical foundations for the concept of *rasa* and its link to ethical transformation. In addition, local commentaries, modern Balinese literary studies, and ethnographic interpretations by scholars such as I Gusti Ngurah Bagus, I Made Titib, and Wayan Suteja Neka serve as interpretive anchors for contextual understanding.

By integrating both scriptural and cultural materials, the research situates Balinese Hindu literature within its intercultural continuum—connecting Indian aesthetic philosophy with local Balinese theological expression.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed following the Miles and Huberman (1994) qualitative analysis model, encompassing three interactive stages:

1. Data Reduction – selecting and condensing relevant textual excerpts that illustrate themes of dharma, rasa, and aesthetic form. Passages containing moral dialogues, symbolic imagery, and poetic expressions were prioritized for detailed interpretation.
2. Data Display – organizing these excerpts in thematic matrices that relate aesthetic features (language, rhythm, metaphor) to ethical and theological meanings. This process enabled visual mapping of how beauty communicates virtue within the texts.
3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification – synthesizing interpretive insights to construct a coherent understanding of how Balinese literary aesthetics function as moral-spiritual pedagogy.

To ensure interpretive validity, the study employed hermeneutic triangulation, comparing textual findings with ritual and performative contexts such as puja stotra chanting, makidung recitations, and wayang performances. This triangulation helped confirm that the literary symbols analyzed in the texts correspond to living ritual expressions within Balinese Hindu practice.

Analytical interpretation also engaged the principle of contextual reflexivity—acknowledging the researcher’s positionality within Balinese cultural and religious frameworks. This reflective awareness ensured that analysis remained sensitive to the indigenous epistemology (*desa kala patra*), preserving the authenticity of meaning as experienced by the Balinese Hindu community.

Through this integrated analytical process, the study not only interprets the aesthetic embodiment of dharma but also illuminates the dynamic interplay between literary art, moral education, and spiritual transformation within Balinese Hindu culture.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Literary Manifestations of Dharma

Balinese literature transforms dharma from an abstract ethical doctrine into a lived poetic experience. Through rhythmic language, narrative structure, and symbolic imagery, the principles of righteousness and harmony are made tangible and affective. In *Kakawin Arjunawiwaha*, the beauty of Arjuna’s ascetic journey epitomizes the fusion of *śīla* (moral discipline) and *śraddhā* (faith). Arjuna’s meditative act—depicted amidst a serene natural landscape—symbolizes the alignment of human intention with cosmic order (*ṛta*). The text’s metrical precision and melodic rhythm mirror the hero’s inner balance, demonstrating how aesthetic order becomes ethical revelation.

This work reveals that artistic form in Balinese literary tradition is never arbitrary; it is imbued with theological meaning. The structure of the *kakawin* parallels the path of yoga, where harmony between thought, word, and action (*Tri Kaya Parisudha*) becomes both

narrative and moral foundation. Thus, the act of reading or chanting Arjunawiwaha functions as a ritual of purification—inviting the audience to emulate Arjuna’s devotion, discipline, and transcendence.

Similarly, Geguritan Dharma Prawerti offers a vernacular embodiment of dharma, using accessible language and melodic phrasing to communicate moral values to the wider community. Its verses encourage listeners to maintain filial devotion, respect for teachers (guru bhakti), and social harmony—echoing the ethical triad of manacika, wacika, kayika. The repetition and cadence typical of geguritan not only facilitate memorization but also generate emotional resonance (rasa dharma), allowing moral insight to penetrate the heart rather than remain intellectual. In this way, the geguritan bridges art and ethics, performance and piety, community and divinity.

The aesthetic pleasure derived from these texts thus operates as a spiritual pedagogy. Beauty (sundaram) becomes a medium for virtue (śivam), and the poetic imagination becomes a reflection of divine truth (satyam). This synthesis affirms that in Balinese Hindu culture, the appreciation of art is itself an ethical act—an engagement with the sacred through the refinement of feeling.

#### 4.2. The Fusion of Beauty and Virtue

In Balinese aesthetics, the experience of beauty is inseparable from the cultivation of moral consciousness. The concept of taksu—the sacred charisma or spiritual energy that animates art—embodies this unity. A poet, dancer, or dalang (shadow-puppet master) who possesses taksu is believed to channel divine energy, becoming a vessel through which dharma manifests in artistic form. This principle resonates with Bharata’s ancient aesthetic theory that rasa arises from the purification of emotion (citta-śuddhi). When artistic creation is rooted in sincerity and self-discipline, it becomes an act of moral illumination.

Balinese poets (kawi) are not mere craftsmen of words; they are spiritual intermediaries who mediate between beauty and virtue. Their creative process (karya sastra) is an extension of religious devotion (bhakti), transforming artistic inspiration into ethical embodiment. The unity of beauty and virtue is further sustained by the communal nature of Balinese art. Literature is performed and shared, not isolated; its beauty gains ethical force through collective participation. When a poem is sung, recited, or dramatized, it enacts dharma within the social body—synchronizing emotion, intellect, and spirit across the community.

Through such integration, literature becomes a transformative discipline. Experiencing the beauty of dharma evokes empathy, compassion, and restraint (dama). Art becomes ethics made visible, and ethics becomes art made beautiful. The reader or listener does not merely receive a message but undergoes a subtle transformation of consciousness—a process of moral refinement through aesthetic contemplation. As a result, Balinese literature transcends entertainment and enters the realm of adhyātma-śikṣā—spiritual education through beauty.

### 4.3. Theology of Aesthetic Experience

Within Balinese Hindu cosmology, art (*kala*) is fundamentally theological. Every act of creation is regarded as an offering (*yajña*) to the divine, an act of maintaining cosmic equilibrium (*Tri Hita Karana*). Thus, the creation of literature is not an individualistic endeavor but a ritual of remembrance (*smaraṇa*)—a conscious participation in the cycle of divine creativity (*śṛṣṭi*, *sthiti*, *pralaya*). The poet's words are not personal property; they are manifestations of *śabda brahman*—the divine word that animates existence.

In this sense, the aesthetic of *dharma* is not only human-centered but cosmically participatory. When a poet composes or a community recites sacred verses, they re-enact the primordial sound (*nāda*) that sustains the universe. This act bridges *bhuana alit* (microcosm) and *bhuana agung* (macrocosm), reaffirming the Balinese worldview that art, morality, and nature are interdependent aspects of divine order.

Furthermore, the ritual dimension of literature strengthens its theological significance. Recitations of *kakawin* and *geguritan* during ceremonies—such as *odalan* or *piodalan* temple festivals—transform literature into liturgy. Words become offerings, rhythm becomes devotion, and emotion becomes prayer. Through this sacred performance, the audience experiences a communal theology of beauty, in which aesthetic pleasure and spiritual realization merge seamlessly.

Ultimately, the aesthetic of *dharma* in Balinese Hindu literature serves as both human delight and divine realization. It sanctifies art as a means of remembering the divine presence in every aspect of life. Beauty, in this theological sense, is not decoration but revelation—the visible form of the invisible truth. When experienced with awareness, it purifies perception, awakens devotion, and sustains the harmony between human creativity and divine order.

## 5. Conclusion

The study concludes that Balinese Hindu literature manifests a living synthesis of aesthetics and ethics—a true aesthetic of *dharma*. Through poetic beauty, rhythmic structure, and symbolic imagery, Balinese writers and performers transform moral philosophy into emotional experience and spiritual reflection. Literary works such as *Kakawin Arjunawiwaha* and *Geguritan Dharma Prawerti* demonstrate that *dharma* is not only spoken or taught but felt and experienced through the refinement of emotion (*rasa dharma*).

This synthesis of the ethical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions reveals that art in Hindu thought is not a detached sphere of pleasure but an embodied practice of virtue and devotion. The unity of *satyam*, *śivam*, *sundaram*—truth, goodness, and beauty—becomes both the foundation and the fruit of literary expression. By merging moral content with aesthetic form, Balinese Hindu literature provides a pathway to virtue through feeling and reflection, enabling individuals to internalize *dharma* as lived consciousness rather than abstract rule.

Moreover, the Balinese literary tradition affirms that beauty (*sundaram*) has ontological significance—it mirrors the harmony of the universe (*ṛta*). To experience beauty, therefore, is to participate in the divine order. The aesthetic encounter becomes an act of *bhakti*



(devotion) and śraddhā (faith), where contemplation of artistic form leads to the realization of spiritual truth.

Within this framework, literature functions as a spiritual pedagogy—a ritual of awareness that unites emotion, intellect, and morality. It refines the soul, nurtures compassion, and sustains social balance. Thus, the aesthetic of dharma not only inspires personal transformation but also reinforces the collective moral fabric of Balinese society.

Ultimately, Balinese Hindu literature affirms the sacred unity between art and virtue, revealing that the pursuit of beauty is inseparable from the pursuit of righteousness. To feel beauty is to draw near to divinity; to create beauty is to enact dharma in visible form. The poetic imagination thus becomes a sacred bridge between the finite and the infinite, between human consciousness and divine order.

### 5.1. Author Contributions

The author independently conceptualized the study, formulated the research design, and carried out comprehensive hermeneutic and textual analyses. The author synthesized classical aesthetic theories, Balinese philosophical commentaries, and interpretive insights from both local and global Hindu scholarship. All stages—from literature review to theoretical interpretation and final synthesis—were conducted solely by the author, ensuring coherence between philosophical vision and textual evidence.

### 5.2. Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise, that could have influenced the design, analysis, or conclusions of this study. All interpretations were guided solely by academic integrity and devotion to the preservation and understanding of Balinese Hindu cultural heritage.

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## Keterangan:

- Sumber klasik India (Bharata, Abhinavagupta, Radhakrishnan) memperkuat aspek filsafat dan estetika Hindu.
- Sumber lokal Bali (Bagus, Putra, Neka, Titib, Wiana) memperkuat konteks empiris dan teologis.
- Sumber metodologis (Miles & Huberman, Ricoeur) memperkuat landasan analisis hermeneutik.
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