



Visual semiotics of the *Menak Lare* manuscript Illumination for character education



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ABSTRACT

Studies on the *Menak* tradition have generally focused on philology, literary history, textual transmission, and heroic narratives. The illumination of *Serat Menak Lare*, however, has rarely been read as a visual system that carries cultural meanings and educational values. This research applies a qualitative interpretive approach, using the *Serat Menak Lare* manuscript from the Sonobudoyo Museum Yogyakarta collection, coded B55_00152, as its object of study. Among the nine illuminations found in the manuscript, the analysis focuses on pages 289–290, since they form the most complex and representative double page illumination. Data were collected through visual observation and library research. The analysis was conducted through visual description, semiotic classification of icons, indexes, and symbols, interpretation within Javanese-Islamic cultural contexts, and mapping of character education values. Research credibility was strengthened through triangulation of sources, methods, and theory. The findings show that the illumination is organized through symmetrical composition, layered frames, visual hierarchy, motif repetition, and color arrangement. The motifs of *kala*, crowned elephants carrying maces, *padma*, floral vines, and gateway-like forms construct a visual narrative of protection, moral authority, purity, and cultural continuity. Pragmatically, the illumination does not function as a literal illustration of the Amir Hamzah story. It works instead as a visual threshold that guides readers into the moral and religious atmosphere of the text. This study offers a framework for reading Javanese-Islamic manuscript illumination as visual heritage and as a source of reflection for character education.



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1. Introduction

Manuscript illumination is a visual art tradition that does more than adorn written texts. It operates as a system of signs through which symbolic meaning, cultural values, and social identity are conveyed by means of color, motif, and visual composition. In Islamic traditions, illumination developed in Qur'anic manuscripts, religious books, and literary works, drawing on geometric, floral, and cosmological motifs as part of religious and cultural expression. In Southeast Asia, this tradition reflects an encounter between transregional Islamic aesthetics and local cultural particularities. Manuscripts from the Malay world, Java, and the southern Philippines, for example, display varied visual styles shaped by the historical, religious, and cultural contexts of each region [1], [2], [3]. Manuscript illumination therefore needs to be read as a form of visual communication that connects text, aesthetics, belief, and cultural memory. Within the corpus of Javanese Islamic literature, *Serat Menak* occupies an important position as a local adaptation of Islamic heroic narratives. One of its variants, *Serat Menak Lare*, recounts the youth of Amir Hamzah, the uncle of the Prophet Muhammad, as a figure associated with courage, religiosity, leadership, and moral exemplarity.

The manuscript is significant as a literary work and as a visual artifact, since it contains illuminations marked by Javanese aesthetic features, including symmetrical composition, repetitive patterns, floral motifs, and symbols rooted in local culture. As seen in various other Javanese Islamic manuscripts, these visual elements reveal a negotiation between Islamic teachings and Javanese cultural idioms within the history of Islamization in Java [4], [5]. In this sense, the illumination of *Serat Menak Lare* may be understood as a visual space where religious, social, and ethical values are presented through symbolic forms.

This study seeks to analyze the visual symbols in the illumination of *Serat Menak Lare* through the lens of visual semiotics. It then identifies the educational values embedded in the illumination and explains their relevance to character education grounded in cultural heritage. This aim is important because meaning in illumination does not appear in a direct or self-evident way. It is formed through the relations among motif, color, composition, cultural context, and reading practice. Visual semiotics provides a useful framework for understanding these elements as a system of signs shaped by cultural convention and interpretive processes [6], [7].

Through this approach, the illumination of *Serat Menak Lare* can be read beyond its artistic beauty as a visual text that preserves a worldview, moral values, and cultural memory. The study of manuscript illumination is also relevant to heritage-based education. Within this approach, cultural artifacts are treated not merely as objects of preservation, but as learning resources that can foster historical awareness, cultural identity, and ethical reflection among students [8], [9]. This perspective resonates with character education, which emphasizes the development of values such as responsibility, integrity, empathy, cooperation, and respect through learning experiences that are contextual and close to students' cultural lives [10], [11]. In this context, traditional manuscripts offer an opportunity to be reintroduced as media for value education, not through a romantic repetition of the past, but through a critical reading of symbols and meanings that can still speak to the needs of contemporary education.

So far, studies of Southeast Asian Islamic manuscripts have largely focused on philology, codicology, textual interpretation, manuscript conservation, and historical reconstruction [12], [13]. Research on manuscript illumination has developed in European, Middle Eastern, and Malay traditions, particularly through material, art historical, and visual semiotic perspectives [2]. The illumination of *Serat Menak Lare*, however, has not received sufficient scholarly attention, especially as a visual object related to character education. Previous studies of the *Menak* tradition have tended to place this manuscript within the framework of literary history, heroic narrative, or textual transmission.

The relationship between illuminated motifs, symbolic meaning, and educational values has yet to be explained in a focused manner. This gap provides the basis for the present study. The novelty of this study lies in its reading of the illumination of *Serat Menak Lare* as a visual sign system that can be mapped onto values of character education. Rather than treating illumination as an ornament or textual supplement, this study traces how visual elements such as motif, color, composition, and cultural symbols generate meanings related to religiosity, courage, responsibility, self-control, and respect for tradition. By integrating manuscript studies, visual semiotics, and heritage-based education, this research contributes to the study of Javanese Islamic manuscript illumination while offering a conceptual framework for using traditional cultural artifacts as sources of value learning in contemporary education.

2. Method

This study employs an interpretive qualitative approach to examine the symbolic meanings embedded in the illumination of the *Serat Menak Lare* manuscript. This approach was chosen because the object of study consists of signs, symbols, and visual representations whose meanings cannot be adequately explained through formal description alone. They need to be interpreted within the cultural context of Javanese Islam [3], [14]. The object of this research is the *Serat Menak Lare* manuscript from the collection of Museum Sonobudoyo Yogyakarta, catalogued as B55_00152. The manuscript contains nine illuminations, yet the analysis centers on pages 289–290, which form a unified double-page illumination. These pages were selected

purposely because they present the most complex and representative visual composition, including ornamental motifs, figurative symbols, symmetrical patterns, and color variations that are relevant to semiotic analysis.

Data were collected through direct observation and library research. Observation was conducted by examining and documenting the visual elements of the illumination. Library research provided the conceptual grounding for manuscript illumination, visual semiotics, heritage-based education, and character education. The units of analysis include visual motifs, symbols, colors, composition, and aesthetic principles such as symmetry, harmony, and repetition. The research instruments consisted of visual observation sheets, photographic documentation, analytical notes, and a semiotic mapping matrix. This matrix was used to record the relationships among visual elements, sign categories, cultural meanings, supporting sources, and the educational values interpreted from the illumination.

Data analysis proceeded in four stages. The first stage involved visual description, which identified the forms, motifs, colors, layout, and composition of the illumination. The second stage classified the signs according to Peirce's categories of icon, index, and symbol [6]. The third stage interpreted cultural meanings by relating visual symbols to the context of Javanese-Islamic culture and the manuscript traditions of the Indonesian archipelago. The fourth stage interpreted educational values by mapping symbolic meanings onto the frameworks of heritage-based education and character education, especially the values of religiosity, responsibility, integrity, cultural awareness, and social concern [15], [16].

Value mapping was carried out only when visual evidence, cultural context, and scholarly support pointed in the same interpretive direction. Research credibility was maintained through source, method, and theoretical triangulation. Source triangulation was carried out by comparing the visual interpretation with studies on Islamic manuscripts, Javanese-Islamic traditions, and character education. Methodological triangulation was applied through the combination of visual observation and library research. Theoretical triangulation brought together visual semiotics, heritage-based education, and character education as complementary perspectives. This procedure was used to strengthen the validity of the interpretation and reduce bias in reading the data. Accordingly, the findings of this study are positioned as a conceptual interpretive reading, not as an empirical test of learning effectiveness in the classroom.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Visual Evidence of the Illumination in *Serat Menak Lare*

The visual evidence analyzed in this study comes from the *Serat Menak Lare* manuscript in the collection of Museum Sonobudoyo Yogyakarta, catalogued as B55_00152. The manuscript is written in Javanese script on European paper and measures approximately 25 × 35 cm. Although *Serat Menak Lare* is more often treated as a literary work recounting the youth of Amir Hamzah, the presence of illumination in the manuscript shows that it also needs to be read as a visual artifact.

The text does not appear as writing in isolation. It is surrounded by ornamentation that gives the page aesthetic, symbolic, and cultural emphasis. The manuscript contains nine illuminations, yet this study focuses on pages 289–290. These two pages form a single visual unit, known as a double-page illumination. They were selected because their visual arrangement is the most complete among the illuminated sections of the manuscript. The pages bring together figurative, floral, and geometric motifs, along with symmetrical patterns and a rich range of colors. For this reason, pages 289–290 provide a strong basis for examining the relationship between visual form, symbolic meaning, and educational values, which form the main concern of this study. *Menak Lare* can be seen in Fig. 1.



Fig 1. *Menak Lare* Illuminated Manuscript on pages 289–290

Visually, the illumination on pages 289–290 is arranged around the main text field placed at the center of the page. This text field is enclosed by layered frames that separate the written space from the ornamental field. Such an arrangement indicates that illumination works beyond page decoration. It also marks the hierarchy of the text. The ornament directs the reader's gaze toward the center of the page, as though the text were positioned as a protected core and granted visual dignity. In the tradition of Javanese-Islamic manuscript illumination, this kind of ornament often serves to affirm the status of the text and to create a visual impression of sacredness or high value [17], [18]. As can be seen in Fig. 2.



Fig 2. Detail *Kala*, Crowned Elephants, *Padma* Motifs

Several main motifs can be clearly identified. At the upper part of the frame, there is a gateway like form with a crowned *buta* or *kala* face placed on the central axis. On the lower left and right sides, two crowned elephants carrying maces face toward the text. Between these larger elements appear lotus or *padma* motifs, floral vines, and repeated decorative patterns that fill the frame. The layout shows a strong sense of order, the *kala* occupies the upper threshold, the elephants stand below as guardian figures, while the floral motifs bind the space between them. Through this composition, the pages do not appear as a random accumulation of ornaments, but as a visual arrangement with a clear logic of placement. Color also plays an important role in shaping the visual character of the illumination. Red, yellow, white, green, black, and gold accents appear on the frames, crowns, floral motifs, and principal figures. These colors make the page decorative, while helping to distinguish the text zone, ornamental field, and emphasized motifs. Firm contours and flat color application create an impression of order, density, and balance. Siswati notes that repeated forms, color arrangement, and strong contour lines are important features of the visual character of *Menak Lare*, especially in building ornamental rhythm and compositional balance [19]. Pages 289–290 may therefore be understood as a visual gateway into the manuscript. Before the reader enters the narrative, the illumination first establishes a particular atmosphere through frames, guardian figures, color, and repeated motifs. The *kala* at the top, the crowned elephants at the lower sides, the *padma* in the transitional spaces, and the floral vines surrounding the text show how the manuscript organizes meaning through position and visual order. This visual evidence provides the basis for the following analysis, namely the reading of syntactic structure, the semiotic meanings of the main motifs, the relationship between illumination and the *Menak Lare* narrative, and the mapping of character education values.

3.2. Syntactic Structure: Composition, Symmetry, and Visual Hierarchy

The syntactic analysis in this study is directed toward the formal relations among visual elements in the illumination of *Serat Menak Lare*. At this stage, the discussion postpones the symbolic meanings of individual motifs and focuses instead on how motifs, colors, lines, fields, and spaces are arranged into a coherent composition. In semiotics, the syntactic dimension concerns the relations among signs within a visual system. The main points of attention therefore include arrangement, position, repetition, balance, and the pattern of relations among parts [20]. The illumination on pages 289–290 shows a page structure organized through clear spatial division. The text field occupies the center and is surrounded by layered frames. This placement turns the text into the main point of attention, while the surrounding ornament functions as a guiding space and a boundary. Through this arrangement, the reader does not encounter the text merely as a sequence of Javanese letters. The eye is first led through the visual structure that encircles it. The frame does more than close the edges of the page; it creates a path of vision toward the textual center.

The composition of these pages rests on symmetry. Elements on the left and right sides are arranged in pairs, producing horizontal balance. The two crowned elephants carrying maces, for instance, are placed on the lower left and lower right sides, with their orientation directed toward the text field. Together, they form a visual pair that keeps the composition from leaning toward one side. This pattern is close to the visual tendency of Javanese-Islamic illumination, which often brings geometric forms, floral motifs, and symbolic figures into a balanced arrangement [17]. In addition to horizontal symmetry, the pages also present a strong vertical axis. At the upper part of the frame, a crowned buta or *kala* face is placed exactly on the central axis. Beneath it lies the text field, while the paired elephants appear below as balancing elements. This upper–middle–lower arrangement creates a recognizable visual hierarchy: the upper section becomes the entry point for the gaze, the middle section serves as the reading center, and the lower section acts as a visual base that strengthens the composition. In this way, the illumination establishes a reading direction that works visually as well as textually. *Padma* motifs and floral vines fill the spaces among these larger elements. Their presence softens the transition between the *kala*, the text, and the elephants. The vines repeated along the frame create a visual rhythm that binds the entire page. Such repetition matters because it gives an impression of continuity, as though all elements move around the text within a controlled pattern. In the study of *Menak Lare*, repeated forms and firm visual arrangement are considered part of the ornamental character that builds rhythm and order on the page [19].

Lines and colors also operate syntactically. Strong contour lines separate the bodies of the motifs from the background, while red, yellow, white, green, black, and gold accents help distinguish visual zones. At this stage, color is treated as a device for organizing fields, the frame, the principal figures, and the filling spaces become easier to distinguish. Gold accents on the crowns and certain lines create visual emphasis on parts that demand attention. In the manuscript traditions of the Indonesian archipelago, illumination often marks important sections of a text through the combination of color, framing, and ornamental density [21]. The syntactic structure of the illumination on pages 289–290 therefore reveals a deliberately constructed visual order. The text is placed at the center, the *kala* gives weight to the upper section, the crowned elephants create balance below, while the *padma*, floral vines, lines, and colors unify the whole composition. This analysis is important because it shows that the interpretation of illumination begins with observable visual arrangement, rather than detached symbolic assumptions. This structure provides the basis for the semiotic reading developed in the following section.

3.3. Semantic Analysis: The Meanings of the Kala, Crowned Elephants, Padma, and Floral Vines

After the visual structure of pages 289–290 has been examined syntactically, the next step is to interpret the meanings of the main motifs that shape the illumination. The semantic analysis in this section moves beyond the identification of forms and traces the movement from denotative meaning to connotative meaning. Denotation refers to what is directly visible

on the page, while connotation concerns the cultural, religious, and historical associations attached to those visual forms [22]. In visual semiotics, the relation between form and meaning never stands in isolation. An image may resemble a particular object, yet it may also function as an icon, symbol, or metaphor whose meaning is shaped by the cultural traditions of its readers [23]. For this reason, the motifs in the illumination of *Serat Menak Lare* need to be read as part of a Javanese-Islamic sign system, rather than as decorative elements placed merely to fill the empty spaces of the page. The most prominent motif in the upper frame is the crowned *buto* or *kala* face. Denotatively, this motif appears as a giant face with a forceful expression, positioned at the upper center of the frame like a guardian of the threshold. In Javanese visual tradition, the *kala* form is widely known in temple architecture, especially as an element placed on gateways or above entrances. Jordaan explains that gateways in ancient Javanese architecture often mark the movement from an ordinary space into a more sacred one [24]. Fontein *et.al.* also read the *kala* figure as a symbolic guardian of important spaces [25]. In the illumination of *Serat Menak Lare*, the presence of *kala* can therefore be understood as a sign of protection and the control of danger. It does more than decorate the upper part of the page. It affirms that the text beneath it enters a realm of value that is guarded, filtered, and endowed with spiritual dignity.

The placement of *kala* at the top also reveals a connection between manuscript visuality and older layers of Javanese cultural memory. This motif comes from Hindu-Buddhist iconography, yet in a Javanese-Islamic manuscript it does not simply lose its earlier resonance. Its function is adjusted within a new cultural setting. Herusatoto places symbols of this kind within Javanese cosmology, where they mark forces that regulate the boundary between disorder and order [26]. In the context of *Serat Menak Lare*, *kala* may be read as a symbol of a moral threshold. The reader is reminded that the text ahead is not an ordinary narrative space, but a space that contains teachings on courage, self-control, and firmness of faith. Here, visual meaning arises from the relation among form, position, and the cultural context that activates it. This reading is in line with studies of Southeast Asian cultural symbols, which show that visual meaning often emerges from the encounter between local form, narrative, and collective memory [27].

The next motif is the pair of crowned elephants carrying maces on the lower left and right sides. Denotatively, the elephants can be recognized through their large bodies, trunks, broad ears, crowns, and weapons. The crowns and maces, however, indicate that these elephants are not represented as ordinary animals. They have been shaped as symbolic figures. In South and Southeast Asian iconography, elephants are often associated with strength, authority, wisdom, and the legitimacy of power [28]. Lombard also shows that in post-Indianized Javanese culture, symbols of large animals were often attached to ideas of ordered and dignified power [29]. On pages 289–290, the elephants do not appear in isolation. They come in a pair, face the text, and carry maces. This arrangement strengthens their role as visual guardians protecting the center of the page.

The mace carried by the elephants deserves to be read as a meaningful element in its own right. The crown marks elevated status, while the mace suggests vigilance and protective force. Together, these attributes make the crowned elephant appear powerful yet controlled, dignified yet far from wild. This meaning becomes important when connected to the narrative of *Menak Lare*, which presents the young Amir Hamzah as a figure being formed through courage, discipline, and self-mastery. The elephant in the illumination does not need to be read as a direct illustration of a particular scene. It functions instead as a sign that strengthens the moral atmosphere of the text, power must remain within the bounds of responsibility.

The crowned elephant and the mace form a visual metaphor of authority governed by wisdom. At this point, the relation between visual motif and the moral message of the manuscript begins to appear, although its narrative function will be discussed more fully in the pragmatic section. *Padma* motifs and floral vines provide a different layer of meaning from the *kala* and elephants. Denotatively, the *padma* appears as a lotus placed in transitional fields among the principal figures, while the floral vines surround the frame as repeated ornamentation.

In Javanese and Southeast Asian traditions, flowers signify beauty, purity, growth, and the balance of life. Gallop shows that floral motifs in Malay and Indonesian manuscripts often carry symbolic weight beyond their decorative function [18]. In the illumination of *Serat Menak Lare*, the *padma* and floral vines soften the visual tension between the guardian figures and the text field. The *kala* and elephants create a protective impression, while the flowers and vines introduce a sense of inner growth, refinement, and continuity. Southeast Asian *Dalā'il al-khayrāt* manuscripts also show that Islamic illumination in the region often brings religious reverence into contact with local visual styles [2].

Within this framework, the floral motifs in *Serat Menak Lare* may be understood as part of a visual language that connects beauty, spirituality, and cultural identity. The overall gateway-like form of the illumination strengthens the relation among these motifs. The text stands at the center, surrounded by layered frames, guarded by the *kala* above and the elephants below, then filled with *padma* and vines that bind the entire field. Semantically, the gateway form can be read as a sign of transition: the reader moves from the outer space into the textual space, from seeing toward understanding, from ornament toward meaning. Color deepens this structure of meaning; (1) Gold emphasizes nobility and elevated status; (2) red evokes force, courage, and energy; (3) black gives firmness; (4) green, white, and yellow soften the atmosphere through associations with fertility, purity, and balance [26]. The semantic meaning of the illumination on pages 289–290 is therefore formed through a network of signs: *kala* as the guardian of the threshold, elephants as dignified power, the mace as vigilance, *padma* as purity, vines as continuity, the gateway as a passage toward knowledge, and color as the force that shapes the visual mood. Together, these signs create a visual narrative of a text that is protected, honored, and directed toward the moral formation of its readers.

3.4. Pragmatic Analysis: The Function of Illumination in the *Menak Lare* Narrative and Javanese-Islamic Culture

While semantic analysis treats motifs as carriers of meaning, pragmatic analysis asks how those meanings work for readers, texts, and the cultural environment that produced them. In Morris's sense, pragmatics concerns the relationship between signs and their users [20]. In the illumination of *Serat Menak Lare*, this relationship can be seen in the way pages 289–290 shape the act of reading. The reader does not encounter the text directly. Before reaching it, the eye passes through a dense visual frame: the *kala* at the top, the crowned elephants on the lower sides, the *padma*, floral vines, colors, and ornamental lines. Through this arrangement, the manuscript page functions as an entrance space, rather than a plain writing surface. In this context, illumination works as a threshold of reading. It prepares the reader to enter a text that tells of the formation of the young Amir Hamzah. The gateway form, guardian figures, and dense ornamentation suggest that the framed text holds a special status. In the manuscript traditions of the Indonesian archipelago, illumination often marks important textual sections and signals the status of a manuscript as a valued cultural object [21].

The pragmatic function of illumination, then, lies in the way it shapes the reader's attitude. The text is invited to be read with attention, respect, and awareness of the values it carries. One important question arises from this reading: why do motifs such as the *kala* and crowned elephants appear in a manuscript about Amir Hamzah, an Islamic heroic figure? These motifs do not need to be understood as literal illustrations of scenes from the story. Their presence is better read as a visual frame that strengthens the moral and heroic atmosphere of the *Menak Lare* narrative. The *kala*, placed at the upper part of the page, works as a marker of boundary and protection. In relation to the heroic narrative, it may be read as a representation of danger that must be controlled before one enters the realm of values. The story of Amir Hamzah's youth revolves around the formation of courage, discipline, and firmness of faith. For that reason, the *kala* becomes a visual sign that resonates with the themes of controlling power and overcoming disorder. The crowned elephants and maces on the lower sides perform a different function, although they remain within the same field of meaning. The elephants evoke strength, authority, and endurance, while the maces add a sense of vigilance. Pragmatically, this pair of elephants guards the text and builds the heroic atmosphere of the page. It does not explain a particular event in the story. Instead, it deepens the narrative character of *Menak Lare* as a story about the formation of a young figure moving toward moral

and religious responsibility. Lombard (*n.d.*) views Javanese culture as a long historical space in which older symbols continue to be reworked within new social and religious structures. The appearance of elephants in a Javanese Islamic manuscript may therefore be read as a visual strategy: a local symbol of authority is used to strengthen the ethical message of an Islamic story.

The pragmatic function of the illumination also appears in its Javanese-Islamic visual synthesis. Elements such as the *kala*, gateway, elephants, and floral vines are rooted in older Javanese visual memory, while the *Menak Lare* text moves within the Islamic literary world of Amir Hamzah. This encounter does not point to contradiction. It shows a process of adaptation. Holt has shown that cultural change in Java often takes place through the reworking of older layers into new forms, rather than through complete rupture [28]. This view is in line with Susilo and Syato, who understand Javanese Islam as a meeting point between local cultural knowledge and Islamic practice [30]. On pages 289–290, this synthesis becomes visible; pre-Islamic symbols remain present, yet their function is redirected to frame an Islamic text as a space of teaching, authority, and moral formation. Within its social environment, illumination also marks the status of the manuscript. A manuscript decorated with elaborate ornamentation, strong colors, and gold accents would not usually be treated as an ordinary reading object. It points to patronage, artistic skill, and a reading community that placed high value on the text. Pandanwangi *et al.*, in their study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century manuscript illumination from the *Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat* milieu, show that illumination design may contain ideology, cultural values, and the worldview of Javanese society [31]. In the context of *Serat Menak Lare*, this social function is significant. Illumination turns the manuscript into an artifact that connects literature, visuality, and cultural authority. Fauji *et al.* also emphasize that Islamic manuscripts of the Indonesian archipelago should be seen as cultural remains that preserve information about literacy practices, local traditions, and the social life of their readers [4].

The illumination on pages 289–290 therefore reflects the moral message of the text, although it does not do so through direct illustration. It works through atmosphere, boundary, guardianship, and the ordering of the reading experience. The *kala* reminds readers of the boundary between ordinary space and the realm of values. The crowned elephants affirm authority and responsibility. The *padma* and floral vines soften the visual field with a sense of purity and continuity. The gateway and layered frames place the text at a protected center. The pragmatic function of the illumination lies in its ability to bring text, reader, and visual tradition into a single cultural experience. From this point, the illumination of *Serat Menak Lare* can be understood as a visual device that helps readers approach the manuscript as a moral, religious, and cultural space.

3.5. Character Education Values in the Illumination of *Serat Menak Lare*

The syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic readings of the illumination in *Serat Menak Lare* show that pages 289–290 contain more than an attractive ornamental arrangement. They also preserve a set of visual devices that can be related to character education values. This relationship should not be drawn in a direct or simplified manner, as though each motif automatically produced a particular form of behavior. Educational value emerges through a process of reading: the visual elements are first identified, their meanings are interpreted within the cultural context of Javanese Islam, and these meanings are then mapped onto relevant character values. In this way, illumination is understood as a source of value reflection, rather than empirical evidence of learning effectiveness in the classroom. This framework is in line with the view that character education concerns the formation of moral knowledge, moral sensitivity, and moral action and that it may be strengthened through learning experiences grounded in art, symbols, and cultural heritage [32], [33]. Within the context of heritage-based education, traditional manuscripts can serve as learning resources because they bring together historical memory, cultural identity, and ethical questions that remain relevant to present-day life [8]. The illumination of *Serat Menak Lare* offers this possibility through the system of signs discussed in the previous sections: the *kala* as threshold and protection, the crowned elephants as authority and responsibility, the *padma* as purity and inner growth, the floral vines as continuity, and the symmetrical composition as

order. These values do not stand apart from one another. They are connected within a single visual field where spirituality, personal discipline, and socio-cultural awareness meet. The following discussion, therefore, maps character education values into three main groups: (1) religiosity and self-control; (2) responsibility, integrity, and discipline; (3) cultural awareness, respect for tradition, and social harmony. To clarify the relationship between semiotic reading and the mapping of character education values, Table 1 summarizes the analytical movement from syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic aspects toward their relevance to character education.

Tabel 1. Semiotic Analysis and Character Education Relevance of the *Menak Lare* Manuscript Illumination

Analytical Aspect	Brief Definition	Focus of Analysis in the <i>Menak Lare</i> Manuscript	Findings	Relevance to Character Education
Syntactic	Study of visual form, structure, and spatial arrangement of elements within illumination	Examines symmetrical composition, hierarchical field division, layered framing, placement of the <i>kala</i> figure at the top, crowned elephants at the lower sides, and floral ornamentation surrounding the text.	The illumination displays a clear hierarchical structure: the <i>kala</i> head occupies the upper protective position, the text is placed at the center, the crowned elephants function as lateral guardians, and flowers/vines unify the visual field. The composition demonstrates symmetry, repetition, balance, and continuity characteristic of classical Javanese illumination.	The syntactic structure offers a visual model of order, discipline, balance, and respect for textual authority. These elements can be used to introduce learners to the value of self discipline, attentiveness, and respect for cultural heritage.
		Interprets the <i>kala</i> as a protective threshold symbol, the crowned elephant with mace as a sign of disciplined power and guardianship, the lotus as purity and inner growth, and the gateway like frame as a transition into a morally and spiritually valued textual space.	Denotatively, the <i>kala</i> appears as a giant face, the elephant as a royal animal, the lotus as floral ornament, and the gateway as a framing device. Connotatively, these motifs suggest protection, moral authority, purity, self-control, and cultural continuity. The illumination constructs a visual narrative in which the text is presented as a protected and dignified source of ethical reflection. The illumination functions as: (1) a visual threshold into meaningful knowledge; (2) a marker of the manuscript's cultural authority and elite status; (3) a medium of Javanese-Islamic visual acculturation; and (4) a guide for readers to approach the text with reverence and moral awareness. It does not illustrate the Amir Hamzah narrative literally, but frames the text as a space of ethical, religious, and cultural reflection.	The semantic meanings of the motifs can be connected to character values such as religiosity, self-control, responsibility, integrity, and inner refinement. Students can be guided to interpret how visual symbols carry moral meanings within Javanese-Islamic culture.
Pragmatic	Study of the function of signs within social, cultural, and ideological contexts	Analyzes how the illumination guides the reader's attitude toward the text, marks the manuscript as a valued cultural object, and visualizes the encounter between older Javanese symbolic forms and Islamic literary content.		Pragmatically, the illumination can be transformed into heritage based character education by encouraging learners to observe visual evidence, interpret symbolic meaning, discuss moral values, and relate cultural heritage to contemporary ethical life.

3.6. Religiosity, Spiritual Awareness, and Self-Control

The value of religiosity in the illumination of *Serat Menak Lare* appears not solely through the story of Amir Hamzah as an Islamic figure, but through the way the manuscript page creates a visual atmosphere before the reader enters the text. The gateway-like frame, the placement of the *kala* at the upper section, and the arrangement of ornaments surrounding the written field suggest that the text is placed within an unusual space. It is presented as a space of values, not merely as a space for reading. In character education, religiosity cannot be limited to knowledge of religious teachings. It also involves an inner awareness that guides a person in reading, acting, and making decisions with moral responsibility. This view is in line with Sargent, who understands character education as a process involving moral knowledge, moral feeling, and moral action [34]. The *kala* motif may be read as the strongest element in building this awareness. In the semantic discussion, the *kala* has been understood as a symbol of threshold, protection, and the control of danger. Within the context of character education, this meaning can be directed toward the value of self-control. The firm expression of the *kala*, placed at the top of the frame, seems to remind readers that before entering the text, one must pass through the boundary between untamed impulse and moral awareness. Bennett explains that symbols in Javanese tradition are often related to ideas of cosmic balance and the control of forces that may become destructive [35]. The *kala* in this illumination can therefore be understood as a visual sign of the need to order oneself before receiving the teachings or values contained in the text.

The gateway form that frames the text also strengthens the value of spiritual awareness. A gateway does more than separate outer and inner spaces. It creates an experience of passage. The reader is drawn from everyday space into a more reflective realm. In the context of heritage-based education, this kind of experience is important because cultural artifacts can help students understand that moral values do not always appear as direct advice. They may be found through symbols, forms, and cultural practices [36]. The illumination of *Serat Menak Lare* allows readers to see cultural heritage as a space for contemplation: how human beings discipline themselves, honor texts, and understand the relation between visual beauty and the depth of values. The *padma* or lotus motif softens this religious message. While the *kala* emphasizes guardianship and self-control, the *padma* brings forward meanings of purity, inner growth, and moral clarity. Its placement among the larger figures allows it to function as a visual and symbolic counterbalance. In Javanese tradition, flowers are often associated with refinement of feeling, purity, and harmony in life [37]. Here, religiosity does not appear in a rigid or doctrinal form. It emerges through an invitation to cultivate a clean inner life. In character education, reading a motif of this kind can train students to grasp values reflectively, rather than merely memorize a list of good traits. Religiosity in the illumination of *Serat Menak Lare* can therefore be understood as an awareness of how one should position oneself before text, tradition, and moral value. The *kala* teaches self-control, the gateway leads the reader into a reflective space, and the *padma* offers an image of purity and inner growth. These values should not be taken as evidence that illumination directly forms students' religious behavior, since this study does not test classroom learning processes. Conceptually, however, the illumination provides a strong visual material for inviting students to read symbols, interpret meanings, and relate them to the formation of spiritual attitudes in everyday life.

3.7. Responsibility, Integrity, and Discipline

The value of responsibility in the illumination of *Serat Menak Lare* can be read most clearly through the crowned elephants carrying maces. Visually, the two elephants are placed on the lower left and right sides, facing the text, as if guarding the main space of the manuscript. This position suggests that strength is not presented as a means of domination, but as a force of protection. The crown marks authority, while the mace signals vigilance. In the context of character education, this arrangement can be read as an image of responsibility: a person who possesses strength, knowledge, or status should use it to protect what is good, rather than serve personal interest. Grönum emphasizes that character education needs to cultivate moral virtues that enable a person to act rightly, especially when that person has the power to choose [38]. The crowned elephant may also be associated with integrity. It is not a wild figure moving freely outside the structure, but part of an ordered composition. Its body is large, yet

its position is controlled. It carries a weapon, yet it does not attack. It stands at the edge, yet it faces the textual center. This kind of order offers a visual message that integrity involves harmony between outward strength and inner restraint. In Javanese cultural thought, formal order is often related to the idea of harmony in life [39]. Integrity in this illumination may therefore be understood not simply as honesty, but as the ability to maintain coherence among intention, attitude, and action. The value of discipline appears strongly through symmetry, repetition, and ornamental precision. The layered frames, repeated floral vines, firm contour lines, and balanced color arrangement show that the illumination was not produced casually. It contains patience, measurement, and controlled repetition. In the making of manuscripts, this kind of pattern required careful attention from the scribe and the illuminator. Behrend, shows that the Javanese manuscript tradition involved meticulous work, seriousness, and respect for formal order [40]. From the perspective of character education, this point is important because discipline does not only mean obedience to rules. It also refers to the willingness to undergo a process with care and consistency.

The visual order on pages 289–290 also helps reveal the relation between aesthetics and morality. The text is placed at the center, the guardian figures stand at the lower sides, the *kala* occupies the upper section, and the *padma* motifs and floral vines bind the whole field. No element seems truly detached from the arrangement. Each part has its own place and role. In character education, this visual logic can serve as material for reflecting on the importance of order in life. A person is not judged only by what he or she possesses, but by the ability to position oneself properly in relation to others, tradition, and larger values. Character does not stop at moral knowledge, it must develop into the habit of good action [41]. Responsibility, integrity, and discipline in the illumination of *Serat Menak Lare* therefore emerge from the relation among the crowned elephants, maces, symmetry, repetition, and compositional order. The elephants and maces present an image of strength that needs to be guided by responsibility. Symmetry and framing teach balance, while repeated motifs point to the importance of perseverance and patience. This illumination does not need to be read as a direct moral instruction. It works instead as a visual device that invites readers to reflect on how strength, order, and firmness of attitude may be directed toward the formation of virtuous character.

3.8. Cultural Awareness, Respect for Tradition, and Social Harmony

The value of cultural awareness in the illumination of *Serat Menak Lare* can be seen in the way the manuscript brings layers of Javanese and Islamic visual traditions onto a single page. The *kala*, crowned elephants, *padma*, floral vines, gateway frame, and use of color do not stand as separate elements. They form a visual language shaped by the cultural experience of Javanese-Islamic society. Here, tradition does not appear as something fixed or frozen. It is processed, rearranged, and given a new function within a Javanese Islamic manuscript. Susilo and Syato explain that Javanese Islam developed through encounters between local cultural knowledge and Islamic practice [30]. Older forms were not always erased, they were negotiated within new frames of meaning. The illumination of *Serat Menak Lare* makes this process visible. Respect for tradition can be read from the manuscript's ability to retain local visual idioms without losing its Islamic orientation. The *kala* and gateway evoke pre-Islamic Javanese visual memory, while the story of Amir Hamzah draws the reader into the world of Islamic heroism. Their encounter need not be understood as a contradiction. It shows how Javanese society placed new teachings within a cultural language already familiar to them. Lombard (*n.d.*) sees this process as part of the long course of Javanese culture, in which external elements were not received passively, but absorbed through local forms. In character education, this reading is important because it shows that respecting tradition does not mean rejecting change. It means understanding cultural roots so that a person does not lose grounding in a changing world.

The *padma* and floral vine motifs also open a space for reading the value of harmony. They do not appear as dominant elements like the *kala* or the elephants. Their role lies in binding the composition. The vines connect parts of the frame, while the *padma* fills transitional spaces among the main figures. Visually, these motifs show that harmony is not always built by the largest or strongest elements. At times, harmony emerges from elements that connect,

soften, and maintain balance. Harmony as an important idea in the Javanese worldview, especially in human relations with others, nature, and the wider order of life [42]. In the context of character education, this meaning can be directed toward the awareness that a person lives as part of a social and cultural environment, not as an isolated individual. Social concern may also be understood through the context of manuscript production and transmission. An illuminated manuscript does not arise from solitary labor. Behind it are scribes, illuminators, patrons, collection keepers, readers, and cultural communities that made its survival possible. Art illumination in manuscripts of the Indonesian archipelago does more than beautify the text [21]. It also marks the manuscript's significance in the social life of its owners and users. The illumination of *Serat Menak Lare* can therefore serve as an entry point for discussing the value of *gotong royong*. A major cultural work usually emerges through the involvement of many hands. *Gotong royong* as an important value in Indonesian society because it contains a willingness to share roles, protect common interests, and respect the contributions of others [43].

Within the framework of heritage based education, these values can be brought into learning by inviting students to read cultural artifacts critically. Students are not only asked to identify motifs. They are also encouraged to ask why certain motifs were preserved, how their meanings changed, and how they relate to social life today. cultural heritage gains educational power when it is not displayed merely as a remnant of the past, but used to build historical awareness and cultural responsibility. From this point, the illumination of *Serat Menak Lare* can become learning material for cultivating respect for tradition, tolerance toward cultural difference, and awareness that identity is never formed from a single source. Cultural awareness, respect for tradition, and social harmony in the illumination of *Serat Menak Lare* therefore emerge from the way the manuscript preserves the encounter among visual and religious elements. The *kala*, elephants, padma, floral vines, and gateway frame show that culture works through continuity, adaptation, and collective labor. For character education, this value can become a basis for inviting students to respect cultural heritage without turning it into a romantic image of the past. What matters more is the ability to read tradition as a source of social wisdom: learning to position oneself, appreciate difference, maintain relationships, and take part in preserving the cultural memory that shapes shared life.

4. Conclusion

This study shows that the illumination of *Serat Menak Lare* on pages 289–290 is more than visual ornamentation intended to beautify the manuscript. Through a visual semiotic reading, these pages reveal an ordered system of signs: the symmetrical composition directs the reader's gaze, the motifs of *kala*, crowned elephants, padma, floral vines, and color create layers of meaning, and the gateway-like frame places the text within a protected and honored space. The illumination therefore functions as a visual device that connects the text, Javanese-Islamic aesthetics, and the moral message embedded in the narrative of the young Amir Hamzah's formation. The character education values contained in this illumination do not appear as direct moral instruction. They emerge through interpretation of the relationship among visual form, symbolic meaning, and cultural context. The *kala* may be read as a symbol of self-control and protection; the crowned elephants and maces point to responsibility, authority, and integrity; the *padma* and floral vines evoke purity, inner growth, harmony, and the continuity of tradition. From this reading, the illumination of *Serat Menak Lare* has conceptual potential as a source of reflection for character education grounded in cultural heritage, especially in cultivating religiosity, discipline, responsibility, cultural awareness, and respect for tradition. The contribution of this study lies in its effort to read Javanese-Islamic manuscript illumination as a visual sign system that can be mapped onto character education values. The study still has limitations, since it focuses on one double-page illumination from a single manuscript in the collection of Museum Sonobudoyo and has not examined its application in classroom learning. Future research may extend the analysis to other illuminations in *Serat Menak Lare*, compare them with different variants of Menak manuscripts, or develop manuscript-based learning models to examine how visual artifacts of this kind can be used more concretely in art education and character education.

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