

Before the Match Begins: The Narrative Agency of a Ball in a Javanese Geguritan

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Muhammad Eriza Abikara's short Javanese geguritan *Bal* through postclassical narratology, object agency, and narrative pedagogy. Although the poem contains no match, opponent, score, or victory, it produces a compact narrative in which a ball moves from material object to tactile companion and finally to a source of enthusiasm for learning. The study applies close textual reading to diction, repetition, temporal markers, apostrophic address, spatial thresholds, and the distribution of agency among the child, ball, school, classroom, and physical education teacher. The findings show that the poem is organised by a pre-competitive temporality. The repeated word *sadurunge*, meaning before, situates the ball at the threshold between play and institutional learning. The verb *dakcekel*, meaning I hold, creates tactile intimacy, while *ngancani*, meaning to accompany, grants the ball a relational role. Rather than distracting the child from education, the ball generates semangat *sinau*, or enthusiasm for learning. The article proposes the concept of the pre-competitive life of the ball to describe sporting objects before they are absorbed into competition, spectacle, nationalism, and measurable achievement. In contrast with the global visibility of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, *Bal* presents football as an intimate pedagogical relation. The poem demonstrates how a minimal vernacular text can distribute narrative agency across human and nonhuman participants and rethink the conventional opposition between play and learning.

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengkaji puisi pendek berbahasa Jawa karya Muhammad Eriza Abikara, *Bal*, melalui naratologi pascaklasik, agensi objek, dan pedagogi naratif. Meskipun puisi ini tidak mengandung pertandingan, lawan, skor, atau kemenangan, ia menghasilkan narasi yang ringkas di mana sebuah bola bergerak dari objek material menjadi teman taktil dan akhirnya menjadi sumber antusiasme untuk belajar. Studi ini menerapkan pembacaan teks yang cermat pada diksi, pengulangan, penanda temporal, sapaan apostrof, ambang batas spasial, dan distribusi agensi di antara anak, bola, sekolah, kelas, dan guru pendidikan jasmani. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa puisi tersebut diorganisir oleh temporalitas pra-kompetitif. Kata *sadurunge* yang diulang, yang berarti sebelum, menempatkan bola di ambang batas antara bermain dan pembelajaran institusional. Kata kerja *dakcekel*, yang berarti saya memegang, menciptakan keintiman taktil, sementara *ngancani*, yang berarti menemani, memberikan peran relasional pada bola. Alih-alih mengalihkan perhatian anak dari pendidikan, bola tersebut membangkitkan semangat *sinau*, atau antusiasme untuk belajar. Artikel ini mengusulkan konsep kehidupan pra-kompetitif bola untuk menggambarkan objek olahraga sebelum diserap ke dalam kompetisi, tontonan, nasionalisme, dan pencapaian yang terukur. Berbeda dengan visibilitas global Piala Dunia FIFA 2026, *Bal* menyajikan sepak bola sebagai hubungan pedagogis yang intim. Puisi ini menunjukkan bagaimana teks vernakular minimal dapat mendistribusikan agensi naratif di antara partisipan manusia dan non-manusia serta memikirkan kembali oposisi konvensional antara bermain dan belajar.

1. INTRODUCTION

Football is among the most visible forms of contemporary global culture. International tournaments transform a game involving bodies and a ball into an expansive spectacle shaped by broadcasting, sponsorship, national identification, celebrity, and commercial circulation. The FIFA World Cup represents the most concentrated expression of this transformation. Its narratives are commonly organised around competition, victory, defeat, heroic players, national teams, decisive goals, and collective emotion. The 2026 tournament further enlarges this

spectacular structure through the participation of 48 teams and the staging of 104 matches across Canada, Mexico, and the United States between 11 June and 19 July 2026 (FIFA, 2024). Within such a setting, the football is usually visible because it is kicked, contested, scored with, and followed by millions of spectators. Its cultural significance appears to depend on the match.

Yet football also exists outside the stadium, tournament, and competitive event. Long before a match begins, a ball may already have entered a child's everyday life as something touched, carried, awaited, remembered, and loved. Its significance may be formed through bodily familiarity rather than sporting achievement. These quieter relations are easily obscured by dominant accounts of football as organised competition and global spectacle. They nevertheless reveal how sporting objects participate in ordinary emotional, educational, and social experience.

The Javanese poem *Bal* by Muhammad Eriza Abikara offers a concise literary representation of this less visible life of football. Published in the anthology *Sakwise Esmiet lan Suparto Brata* in 2016, the poem consists of ten short lines in which a child describes the round shape of a ball, holds it every day before entering school, experiences it as a companion before entering the classroom, and associates it with enthusiasm for learning. The poem concludes with an expression of gratitude to the child's physical education teacher (Abikara, 2016). No match takes place. There is no opposing team, goal, score, victory, or defeat. The central narrative event is instead the child's movement from bodily attachment to educational readiness.

This apparently modest sequence raises an important question about how narrativity can operate within a highly compressed lyrical text. Although *Bal* does not present a developed plot in the conventional sense, it contains a speaking subject, a material object, repeated actions, temporal markers, spatial transitions, affective transformation, and an implied pedagogical relationship. The ball first appears through its physical form, becomes an object of habitual touch, assumes the role of companion, and eventually participates in producing the child's motivation to learn. The poem therefore does more than describe a sporting object. It organises relations among body, object, feeling, time, teacher, school, and classroom.

Recent scholarship confirms that contemporary *geguritan* has become an increasingly productive object of literary investigation. One significant line of research examines its engagement with social conditions. Arawinda and Darni (2021) read the anthology *Serendipiti Astabrata* as a medium of criticism directed toward education, public officials, and social life. Gustari and Hamidah (2023) similarly examined irony in Nono Warnono's *Kidung Langit*, showing how stylistic contrast articulates criticism of moral decline. These studies establish modern Javanese poetry as an active mode of social commentary rather than a purely aesthetic or personal expression.

A second strand concentrates on symbolism and poetic language. Fuadhiyah et al. (2023) employed semiotic analysis to investigate erotic imagery in Poer Adhie Prawoto's *Aku lan Dheweke*. Their analysis demonstrated that bodily and erotic diction may conceal more complex spiritual and intellectual meanings. More recently, Burhanniddawam and Ernawati (2025) examined rhetorical devices in poems by Yusuf Susilo Hartanto, identifying alliteration, assonance, apostrophe, paradox, and hyperbole as devices that strengthen aesthetic expression and social criticism. Together, these studies show sustained attention to what *geguritan* signifies and how its linguistic features intensify meaning.

Environmental criticism has opened another important direction. Nasekha and Mulyana (2024) analysed *Sendhang Tirta Panggesangan* through an ecocritical perspective and demonstrated how the personification of a spring expresses protest against pollution and environmental transformation. Their work is especially relevant because it recognises that a nonhuman entity may occupy an expressive position within a poem. Nevertheless, the personified spring is principally interpreted as a symbolic voice for environmental criticism. The question of how a nonhuman entity participates in the organisation of narrative movement and distributes agency across a textual world remains less fully explored.

Educational research has also approached *geguritan* as a pedagogical resource. Subagyo et al. (2021) developed a local-wisdom-based enrichment book for teaching Javanese poetry writing in elementary schools. Such work confirms the relevance of *geguritan* to language learning, cultural transmission, and literary competence. However, educational studies generally position the poem as material used by teachers to produce predetermined learning outcomes. They rarely ask how education is already imagined within the internal world of the poem or how a material object may itself mediate motivation, bodily experience, and entry into a learning space.

These studies form an important research ecology. Contemporary *geguritan* has been investigated as social criticism, symbolic expression, rhetorical construction, environmental intervention, and educational material. Their dominant approaches are sociological, semiotic, stylistic, ecocritical, and instructional. Such perspectives have produced valuable accounts of what Javanese poems criticise, represent, symbolise, and teach. Yet considerably less attention has been devoted to the narrative processes through which a very short *geguritan* creates relations among human and nonhuman participants.

This limitation is partly connected to an enduring distinction between lyric and narrative. Lyric poetry is commonly associated with voice, emotion, image, reflection, and momentary experience, whereas narrative is associated with characters, events, temporal progression, and transformation. Postclassical narratology has weakened this rigid distinction by extending narrative inquiry beyond conventional prose fiction and by

recognising that narrativity may emerge through experientiality, spatial organisation, cognitive framing, embodiment, and interaction with material environments (Fludernik, 1996; Herman, 2009; Ryan, 2004). A text need not contain a complex sequence of dramatic events to construct a storyworld. Even a compressed lyrical utterance may evoke a subject undergoing change within a temporally and spatially organised environment.

This expanded conception of narrative becomes particularly productive when combined with attention to nonhuman agency. Material objects do not possess intention or consciousness in the same way as human actors. Nevertheless, they may enable actions, redirect movement, generate attachment, organise routines, and alter relations among people and spaces. Bennett (2010) describes materiality as possessing a form of vitality that exceeds its reduction to passive human use, while Latour (2005) argues that agency is distributed across associations of human and nonhuman participants. Within literary narrative, such perspectives make it possible to examine objects not merely as symbols or props but as participants whose properties and relations affect what can happen.

The ball in *Bal* illustrates this possibility. Its roundness invites particular forms of handling and movement. Its daily presence establishes routine. Its position before school and before class connects spaces that are often separated conceptually as play and learning. Most importantly, the child addresses the ball as a companion that produces *semangat sinau*, or enthusiasm for learning. Agency in the poem is therefore neither exclusively human nor literally transferred to an animate object. It emerges relationally through the encounter among the child, the ball, repeated touch, transitional time, school space, and the physical education teacher.

This relational configuration also intersects with recent work on embodied learning. Embodied approaches challenge the separation of physical activity from cognition by understanding movement, sensation, emotion, environmental interaction, and intellectual activity as interconnected dimensions of learning (Faella et al., 2025). Research in physical education likewise shows that play-based and game-based environments can support motivation, engagement, and educational performance rather than functioning merely as breaks from academic activity (Ezeddine, 2025). Such findings help illuminate the pedagogical implication of *Bal*. The child does not abandon play in order to become ready for the classroom. Readiness emerges through bodily and affective attachment to the ball.

The poem therefore invites a reversal of the more familiar understanding of sporting equipment. In instrumental accounts of physical education, a ball can easily be treated as a tool used to develop fitness, technique, discipline, cooperation, or measurable competence (Bailey, 2006; Kirk, 2010; McLennan & Thompson, 2015). *Bal* does not reject these objectives, but it presents another layer of educational experience. The ball becomes meaningful before it is formally used. By being touched and carried, it generates pleasure, companionship, and motivation. The poem thus imagines play and learning not as opposing activities but as an affective continuum.

This article examines how *Bal* transforms a football from sporting equipment into a narrative and pedagogical participant. It asks how the poem constructs the ball's agency through diction, repetition, address, tactile contact, temporal markers, and spatial transition. It also asks how this miniature narrative offers an alternative to dominant football narratives centred on competition, performance, and spectacle.

The article argues that *Bal* narrates what may be called the pre-competitive life of the ball. This term refers to the relations and affects formed before the ball enters a formal match, becomes an object of competition, or acquires value through sporting achievement. In the poem, the ball is held rather than contested, accompanies rather than opposes, and motivates rather than measures performance. Its narrative force lies in helping the child cross the material and affective threshold between play and classroom learning.

The study offers interconnected theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions. Theoretically, it extends postclassical narratology into the study of contemporary Javanese lyric poetry and demonstrates that agency within a miniature narrative may be distributed among a child, an object, bodily routine, affect, a teacher, and educational space. Methodologically, it shows how close attention to verbs, repetition, pauses, forms of address, temporal expressions, and spatial transitions can reveal narrativity in a poem with almost no conventional plot. Practically, it provides an approach to children's *geguritan* that moves beyond treating such texts solely as repositories of moral lessons or instructional material. It demonstrates how Javanese literary texts may support reflection on embodiment, play, motivation, and the participation of ordinary objects in educational experience.

The novelty of the study consequently lies not simply in selecting an understudied poem. It lies in shifting the analysis of *geguritan* from represented meaning toward the relations that make a miniature narrative move. By reading the ball as a relational narrative agent, the article connects Javanese literary studies, postclassical narratology, material agency, and embodied pedagogy. Against the amplified spectacle of global football, *Bal* reveals a quieter but culturally consequential scene in which the meaning of football is already being produced before the match begins.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Postclassical narratology emerged not by rejecting structuralist narratology, but by extending its questions into cognition, embodiment, ideology, media, gender, and cultural context. Herman's distinction between narrative and

nonnarrative sequences remains useful because it directs attention to the way readers organise textual cues into a model of change (Herman, 1997). A sequence need not contain dramatic action to become narratively meaningful. A shift from seeing an object, to touching it, to being accompanied by it, and finally to gaining enthusiasm through it can form a coherent experiential trajectory. In *Bal*, this trajectory is supported by culturally familiar scripts concerning school attendance, classroom entry, physical education, and children's play.

Herman's concept of storyworld is particularly relevant. A storyworld is not merely a setting but a mental model of who did what, when, where, why, and with what experiential consequences (Herman, 2009). *Bal* constructs a sparse storyworld. Its spatial components include school and classroom. Its temporal organisation depends on everyday repetition and the interval before entry. Its participants include a child, a ball, and a teacher. Its affective development moves toward semangat sinau, enthusiasm for learning. The poem gives readers enough cues to infer a larger routine beyond the written lines. The child regularly arrives with or reaches for a ball, experiences companionship through it, and enters class in an energised condition.

Fludernik's concept of experientiality also helps explain why the poem remains narratively legible despite its minimal plot. Narrativity can arise from the representation of embodied consciousness and the experience of a human subject in relation to a world (Caracciolo, 2014; Fludernik, 1996). The repeated first-person markers *aku* and *-ku* locate the poem in the child's lived experience. Yet this experience is not interior in a purely psychological sense. It is organised through touch, movement, timing, and material proximity. The child feels motivated because of a relation with an object and an institutionally situated routine.

To describe the object's role, this article adopts a cautious version of material agency. Bennett argues that material entities participate in events through their capacities and relations, while Latour uses the term *actant* for entities that make a difference in a course of action (Bennett, 2010; Latour, 2005). The ball in *Bal* is not treated as possessing human consciousness. Rather, narrative agency refers to the textual capacity assigned to it and the difference it makes within the represented situation. It shapes the child's routine, occupies the interval before class, becomes the addressee of repeated calls, and contributes to an affective change. Agency is therefore distributed rather than transferred wholesale from human to object.

The final theoretical component is narrative pedagogy. Here the term does not refer only to teaching through stories. It refers more broadly to the way narrative representation makes educational relations intelligible. The poem configures learning as something prepared through an embodied story of contact and companionship. The physical education teacher appears only at the end, but this delayed appearance retroactively frames the preceding relation as pedagogical. The teacher, child, ball, school, and classroom form an assemblage in which motivation emerges. This approach avoids reducing the poem to a moral lesson and instead asks how its formal and material relations produce an educational effect.

Together, these perspectives allow three analytical movements. First, the poem is examined as a micro-narrative whose eventfulness lies in relational transformation. Second, the ball is analysed as a nonhuman participant whose properties and attributed actions affect the storyworld. Third, the educational meaning of the poem is understood as distributed across bodies, objects, times, and spaces. This combination is suitable for a text in which narrative, materiality, and pedagogy are inseparable.

3. METHOD

This study uses qualitative close reading informed by postclassical narratology and material-oriented textual analysis. The primary text is Muhammad Eriza Abikara's *Bal*, published on page 1 of *Sakwise Esmiet lan Suparto Brata Antologi Geguritan* by Balai Bahasa Jawa Timur in 2016. The poem is treated as a complete textual unit. Its short length makes sampling unnecessary because every line can be analysed in relation to the whole.

The analysis proceeded through four stages. *The first stage* identified the poem's participants, spaces, temporal markers, actions, and affective changes. *The second* examined diction and grammar, especially *wujudmu*, *dakcekel*, *sadurunge*, *ngancani*, *semangat sinauku*, and the repeated apostrophe *Bal*. *The third* reconstructed the implied storyworld by asking what routine readers are invited to infer from the compressed lines. *The fourth* interpreted the distribution of agency among the child, ball, teacher, school, and classroom.

The English translation was prepared semantically rather than metrically. Priority was given to preserving direct address, temporal repetition, and the causal movement toward enthusiasm for learning. *Dakcekel* is translated as I hold you rather than I play with you because the tactile specificity is analytically important. *Ngancani* is translated as accompany, retaining its relational force. *Ndadekna semangat sinauku* is rendered as you kindle my enthusiasm for learning in order to preserve both causality and affective activation.

The article does not claim that the poem represents all Javanese experiences of football, childhood, or physical education. Nor does the contextual photograph function as evidence about the poem's author or location. The image is used only to visualise the broader relation among childhood, school space, and football. Interpretive validity is sought through transparency of textual evidence, attention to linguistic detail, and consistency between claims and the poem's verbal structure.

RESULTS

Muhammad Eriza Abikara's *Bal* consists of ten verbal lines arranged around four human and nonhuman presences, namely the lyrical child, the ball, the classroom, and the physical education teacher. Although the poem contains no match, opponent, goal, score, or victory, it develops a compact narrative movement. Its movement begins with the material appearance of the ball, continues through the child's habitual bodily contact with it, and culminates in the transformation of that contact into enthusiasm for learning. The complete poem and its English translation are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The Javanese text and English translation of *Bal* Javanese text English translation

Javanese text	English translation
<i>Wujudmu bunder</i>	Your shape is round
<i>Saben dina dakcekel</i>	Every day I hold you
<i>Sadurunge mlebu sekolah</i>	Before entering school
<i>Bal...</i>	Ball...
<i>Tansah ngancani aku</i>	You always accompany me
<i>Sadurunge mlebu ing kelas</i>	Before entering the classroom
<i>Bal...</i>	Ball...
<i>Ndadekna semangat sinauku</i>	You kindle my enthusiasm for learning
<i>Matur nuwun</i>	Thank you
<i>Guru olah ragaku</i>	My physical education teacher

Note. Source text from Abikara (2016, p. 1). English translation by the author.

The opening line, *wujudmu bunder*, introduces the ball through its most elementary physical property. The poem does not begin with an action performed upon the ball. It first asks the reader to encounter the object through shape. Roundness is therefore not decorative information. It establishes the ball as a materially distinct presence before it acquires sporting or pedagogical meaning. The object is recognised prior to being used.

The second line changes this visual recognition into tactile attachment. The phrase *saben dina dakcekel* indicates that the ball is held every day. The verb *dakcekel* is particularly significant because the child does not initially kick, throw, chase, or compete for the ball. The ball is held. This tactile verb creates a more intimate relation than the conventional actions associated with football. It places the object close to the child's body and turns physical contact into a recurring daily practice.

The temporal phrase *saben dina* further suggests that this relationship is habitual rather than exceptional. The ball does not appear only during a scheduled physical education lesson or formal match. It participates in the child's everyday routine. Habit gives the object narrative continuity. Although the poem recounts no extended sequence of events, repetition implies an activity that has happened before and is expected to happen again.

This routine occurs within a carefully marked transitional time. The expression *sadurunge*, meaning before, appears twice. First, the child holds the ball *sadurunge mlebu sekolah*. Later, the ball accompanies the child *sadurunge mlebu ing kelas*. These expressions construct two thresholds. The first lies between the world outside school and the institution of school. The second lies between the wider school environment and the classroom.

The distinction between *sekolah* and *kelas* is narratively productive. School is a larger social and spatial environment, while the classroom represents a more regulated pedagogical space. The poem moves from entering school toward entering class, but the ball remains present across both thresholds. It therefore connects bodily play with institutional learning rather than separating them.

The two isolated utterances *Bal...* interrupt the syntactic flow. Their ellipses create a pause and direct attention back to the object. The repetition does not merely identify the poem's topic. It functions as a form of address. The child appears to speak to the ball as an interlocutor that can be called, acknowledged, and thanked.

This mode of address intensifies in the line *tansah ngancani aku*. The verb *ngancani*, meaning to accompany, grants the ball a relational role. Grammatically and narratively, the ball is no longer an inert piece of sporting equipment. It becomes a companion. Accompaniment implies duration, proximity, and shared movement. It also indicates that the child is not imagined as entering school alone.

The poem consequently constructs a small narrative network. The child carries or holds the ball, the ball accompanies the child, the school provides the transitional setting, the classroom represents the destination, and the teacher stands behind the child's encounter with physical activity. Agency is distributed across these elements. The child remains the speaking subject, but the child's motivation does not arise exclusively from an autonomous interior will.

This distributed agency becomes explicit in *ndadekna semangat sinauku*. The ball is presented as producing or activating the child's enthusiasm for learning. The causal sequence is striking. Contact with the ball does not lead to a goal, a match, or athletic achievement. It leads to *semangat sinau*, an affective readiness to study.

The poem thus rejects a simple opposition between play and education. The ball does not distract the child from entering the classroom. Its affective force prepares the child to enter it. Physical movement and tactile attachment become conditions through which academic motivation is generated. The ball's pedagogical function does not depend on verbal instruction. It operates through presence, touch, repetition, and companionship.

The closing lines complicate this attribution of agency. After thanking the ball, the poem ends with *guru olah ragaku*. The physical education teacher appears only at the conclusion and does not perform a narrated action. Nevertheless, this final presence reframes the preceding relationship. The teacher may be understood as the human figure who has made the child's encounter with the ball educationally meaningful.

Agency therefore does not simply pass from the teacher to the object. Instead, the poem presents pedagogical motivation as a relational achievement produced among teacher, child, ball, bodily routine, and educational space. The teacher provides the pedagogical horizon, while the ball materialises that horizon in the child's daily experience.

The absence of an actual football match is the most consequential structural feature of the poem. Everything occurs before formal classroom instruction, and apparently before competitive play. The ball has already acquired emotional and pedagogical force before the match begins. It is meaningful without goals, teams, spectators, or victory.

The narrative of *Bal* can therefore be described as pre-competitive. It locates football within an intimate period preceding organised competition. In this period, the ball is held rather than contested, accompanies rather than opposes, and motivates rather than disciplines. The poem narrates not the spectacle of football but the formation of a child's readiness to learn.



Figure 1. Children playing football in a school environment

Note. The photograph is used as a contextual illustration of the relation among childhood, school space, and football. It does not depict the child or location represented in the poem. Photograph by Atyang344, 2023, via Wikimedia Commons, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. The image is reproduced without modification.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that narrative agency in *Bal* does not depend on dramatic eventfulness. The poem's narrative energy arises from a change in relation. At first, the ball is identified by shape. It then becomes an object of repeated touch, a companion across institutional thresholds, and a source of educational enthusiasm. This transformation gives the poem a beginning, development, and consequence even though it lacks a conventional plot. Postclassical narratology helps explain how such a compressed sequence becomes narratively meaningful. Readers can naturalise minimal textual cues by relating them to familiar experiential frames and scripts, thereby reconstructing a storyworld of arriving at school, preparing to enter the classroom, and carrying affect from one activity into another (Fludernik, 1996; Herman, 2009).

The poem's strongest temporal device is not progression toward a final match but repetition of what comes before. Sadurunge appears twice and organises the storyworld around anticipation. The child's meaningful relation with the ball exists before school entry and before classroom entry. This temporal structure can be called pre-competitive because the object has not yet been absorbed into the logic of opponents, scores, rankings, and victory. It is also pre-instructional because the affective preparation for learning occurs before formal teaching. The word before therefore does more than locate events.

It identifies what may be called a pedagogical interval, namely the transitional period between bodily play and formal classroom instruction in which attachment, affective readiness, and motivation are formed. This interval is pedagogical not because explicit teaching has already begun, but because the child's repeated contact with the ball produces an embodied disposition that can be carried into the classroom. Research on embodied learning similarly suggests that movement, emotion, environmental interaction, and cognition participate jointly in educational experience, with bodily activity contributing to motivation, body awareness, and cognitive engagement (Faella et al., 2025). In *Bal*, therefore, the moments before school and before class are not empty pauses between more meaningful activities. They constitute a formative threshold in which the child's attachment to the ball prepares the affective conditions for learning.

This interval challenges dominant football narratives. Global tournaments privilege the visible event. They focus attention on fixtures, national teams, star players, goals, records, stadiums, and broadcast audiences. The 2026 FIFA World Cup, with its forty-eight teams and 104 matches, represents an unprecedented expansion of organised football spectacle (FIFA, 2024). *Bal* moves in the opposite direction. It reduces football to one child and one ball, removes competition, and places the relation at the edge of a classroom. The poem does not oppose the World Cup directly, but its scale and emphasis reveal what spectacular narratives tend to hide. Before football becomes an event for millions, it may be an intimate routine that helps one child feel ready to learn.

The concept of the pre-competitive life of the ball is useful because it identifies a phase of objecthood that is usually overlooked. Sporting objects are often interpreted through function. A ball is designed to be kicked, passed, thrown, caught, or scored with. In *Bal*, however, the ball's first significant action is being held. The tactile relation suspends its conventional sporting function and opens another mode of meaning. Holding permits possession without contest and proximity without opposition. It makes the ball available as a companion rather than as an instrument for defeating others.

The verb *dakcekel* is therefore central to the poem's redistribution of agency. The grammatical form marks the child as the one who holds, but the narrative consequence of holding is not produced by the child alone. The ball's size, roundness, portability, surface, and cultural association with play make this contact possible and meaningful. In Bennett's terms, agency emerges from an assemblage rather than from an isolated will (Bennett, 2010). In Latour's terms, the ball is an actant because it makes a difference in the course of action (Latour, 2005). The poem's final affective state would not be the same without it.

At the same time, the analysis should not romanticise objects by granting them autonomous human-like consciousness. The poem uses apostrophe and personification, but its deeper claim concerns relation. The ball accompanies because the child carries, holds, or remains near it. It motivates because the child has learned to connect it with pleasure, movement, attention, or the physical education teacher. Object agency here is relational and attributed. The ball acts within a network of bodily habit, language, memory, institutional space, and pedagogical mediation.

The delayed appearance of the teacher confirms this distributed structure. If the poem ended with *semangat sinauku*, the ball might appear to be the sole source of motivation. The final line *guru olah ragaku* introduces another causal layer. The child's gratitude can be read as directed toward the teacher who introduced, provided, or taught the meaningful use of the ball. Yet the teacher is not presented as a commanding authority. There is no

instruction, rule, assessment, or disciplinary speech. Pedagogy is visible through the relation that remains after direct teaching has receded from the scene.

This is a significant model of educational influence. The teacher's success is not measured by the child's sporting performance but by the continuing vitality of the child's attachment to learning. The poem suggests that physical education can shape the emotional conditions of education beyond the sports lesson itself. The ball crosses curricular boundaries by carrying affect from bodily activity into classroom study.

In this sense, the poem offers what may be called a vernacular theory of integrated learning. The term vernacular refers here not simply to the use of the Javanese language, but to a form of situated conceptual knowledge that emerges from everyday experience, local expression, and ordinary relations rather than from an explicitly formulated academic theory (Baker, 1984; Valk, 2012). Through the child's voice, the poem proposes its own account of how education works. Learning becomes possible not only through instruction, discipline, or cognitive effort, but also through attachment, pleasure, bodily familiarity, and emotional continuity.

Integrated learning, in this context, refers to the connection among bodily movement, affective experience, environmental interaction, motivation, and cognitive readiness. Embodied approaches to education similarly challenge the separation of physical activity from intellectual learning by showing that movement, sensation, emotion, and cognition participate jointly in educational experience (Faella et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2025). The poem therefore does not merely place physical education beside classroom learning. It imagines them as mutually sustaining processes. Movement generates pleasure, pleasure strengthens attachment, and attachment becomes readiness to learn. The ball functions as the material link through which these domains are connected.

The line *ndadekna semangat sinauku* is especially important because *semangat* is both affective and directional. It is more than happiness. It describes energy, willingness, courage, and readiness to act. The ball does not communicate knowledge content, but it alters the child's orientation toward learning. Narrative pedagogy therefore occurs at the level of disposition. The poem presents education not only as the reception of information but as the cultivation of a body willing to enter a learning space.

The spatial movement from school to classroom reinforces this argument. School is not identical with classroom. The school contains yards, corridors, fields, social encounters, and transitional zones. By placing the ball before entry into class, the poem recognises that learning begins outside the classroom and is prepared by experiences that formal instruction may not control. The ball belongs to this broader ecology of education. It links informal and formal spaces without erasing their differences.

The poem's ellipses after *Bal* create another form of agency. They slow reading and permit the object to occupy the line by itself. The ball becomes visually and rhythmically prominent despite the poem's brevity. The repeated address produces a call that resembles affection more than command. In narrative terms, the pause allows the object to persist between actions. It is not merely used and discarded. It remains present as a participant whose significance exceeds function.

This persistence is related to the poem's vernacular simplicity. *Bal* uses ordinary Javanese words and a childlike speaking position. Such simplicity might invite an exclusively didactic interpretation, for example that sport encourages study or that children should thank teachers. Those messages are present, but they do not exhaust the poem. A narratological reading shows how the didactic effect is formally produced through repetition, temporal thresholds, tactile diction, apostrophe, and delayed human attribution. The poem teaches because it narrates a relation, not because it states a rule.

The analysis also contributes to the study of lyric narrative. *Bal* has the compression, direct address, repetition, and affective concentration associated with lyric poetry. Yet it also contains sequence and transformation. The distinction between lyric and narrative need not be absolute. The lyrical address to the ball becomes the mechanism through which narrative agency is assigned. The poem's emotional intensity and its storyworld construction operate together. This combination is especially visible in short vernacular poetry, where a few lines may imply a much larger habitual world.

For contemporary Javanese literary studies, the poem demonstrates the analytical value of minor texts. A short *geguritan* about a ball can illuminate relations among language, childhood, material culture, education, and global sport. It does not need to imitate the thematic scale of canonical literature to become theoretically productive. Its contribution lies precisely in its smallness. By keeping attention on one ordinary object, the poem reveals an alternative politics of visibility. Spectacular football makes players, nations, and results visible. *Bal* makes touch, companionship, routine, and readiness visible.

The contextual contrast with the World Cup should therefore be understood carefully. The poem was published in 2016 and was not written as a response to the 2026 tournament. The tournament functions as a contemporary horizon that sharpens the poem's difference. During a period when football is globally narrated through expanded competition, *Bal* allows readers to recover football's intimate and pedagogical dimensions. This contrast does not make the poem timeless or universally representative. It shows how a local-language text can interrupt the dominant scale at which football is usually understood.

The theoretical move proposed here is modest but transferable. The pre-competitive life of an object can be investigated wherever objects acquire affective, social, or educational meaning before formal competition begins. Shoes, rackets, uniforms, musical instruments, books, and tools may all have relational lives that exceed their official functions. Narratology can trace these lives by examining how texts organise touch, anticipation, routine, and distributed action. In *Bal*, the ball's most important achievement is not scoring. It is helping a child cross into learning with enthusiasm.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has shown that *Bal* constructs a narratively meaningful world despite its brevity and the absence of a conventional plot. Through repeated touch, temporal markers, direct address, spatial transition, and affective transformation, the poem turns the ball from a sporting object into a companion and pedagogical participant. Its narrative movement does not depend on competition, scoring, or victory. Instead, it develops through the child's everyday attachment to the ball and through the transfer of emotional energy from bodily play into classroom learning. The poem therefore presents football at its most intimate scale, before it becomes a match, spectacle, or measure of performance.

The analysis also demonstrates that the agency of the ball is relational rather than autonomous. The ball acts because its material form, habitual presence, tactile availability, and position within the child's school routine enable particular feelings and movements to emerge. Its agency is produced through an assemblage involving the child, the body, repetition, the teacher, school space, and the classroom threshold. This distributed configuration supports the concept of the pre-competitive life of the ball, referring to the affective, material, and pedagogical relations that develop before organised competition begins. It also reveals a pedagogical interval in which movement and attachment prepare the child for learning. From this perspective, the poem offers a vernacular theory of integrated learning in which bodily pleasure, emotional continuity, and intellectual readiness are not separate educational domains but mutually sustaining processes.

The article consequently contributes to contemporary *geguritan* studies by shifting attention from represented themes toward the relations that generate narrative movement. Theoretically, it extends postclassical narratology into a compressed Javanese lyrical text and shows how nonhuman agency can operate within a miniature storyworld. Methodologically, it demonstrates that close reading of verbs, repetition, pauses, address, temporality, and spatial markers can uncover complex narrativity in an apparently simple poem. Practically, it encourages teachers and readers to approach children's *geguritan* not merely as moral instruction or language-learning material, but as a medium for reflecting on embodiment, affect, play, and educational motivation. Against the global spectacle of football, *Bal* reminds us that some of the game's most consequential meanings are formed before the match begins.

6. REFERENCES

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