



The Betel and Areca symbol in Vietnamese Literature

Hoang Thi Mai

Teacher at FPT Polyschool, Vinh Phuc Campus, Vietnam

Abstract

Artistic symbols serve as an essential means in literary creation, enabling writers to express their thoughts, emotions, and worldviews through images rich in implicit and multilayered meanings. Within the diverse system of symbols in Vietnamese literature, betel and areca stand out as a representative cultural symbol closely associated with traditional customs, social life, and collective consciousness. Using qualitative methods, including analysis and synthesis from an interdisciplinary perspective of literature and culture, this study examines typical works from folk to modern literature such as folktales, folk songs, and poetry. The findings reveal that the betel–areca symbol embodies multiple layers of meaning: it represents faithful love, strong familial bonds, and brotherhood; it functions as a medium for social connection, strengthening community relationships; and it serves as a bridge for romantic relationships in Vietnamese spiritual life. Notably, in Ho Xuan Huong’s poetry, this symbol also becomes a means of expressing individual consciousness and women’s aspiration for happiness, thereby reflecting humanistic values and feminist awareness. The study affirms the enduring vitality and profound cultural significance of the betel–areca symbol, while emphasizing the role of literature in preserving and promoting national identity and enriching human spiritual life in contemporary contexts.

Keywords: Artistic symbol, betel and areca, Vietnamese literature, cultural identity, folk literature, feminist consciousness

Introduction

In the process of literary creation, artistic symbols become an especially important means for writers to express their thoughts, sensibilities, and perceptions of the world. A symbol does not merely convey a direct, surface meaning; it also contains multiple layers of deeper significance, evoking rich and multidimensional associations. Artistic symbols function like a “refreshing stream” that nourishes a work’s soul, guiding readers into the profound dimensions of spiritual life. Therefore, the reception of literature is essentially a process of decoding layers of signs within the text, in which exploring the meaning of symbols plays a particularly crucial role.

A survey of Vietnamese literature across different historical periods reveals the abundant presence of symbols deeply marked by national cultural identity, such as bamboo, the stork, the village wharf, and the communal courtyard. Within this symbolic system, betel and areca emerge as a distinctive symbol, embodying cultural values, customs, and ways of life of the Vietnamese people. Closely associated with folk legends, marriage rituals, and community life, betel and areca are not only familiar images but also represent affection, fidelity, and moral principles.

Based on these considerations, this article focuses on examining the betel and areca symbol in Vietnamese literature in order to clarify its modes of expression and cultural values. Through this study, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the national cultural identity crystallized in literature, while also inspiring a stronger sense of love and pride for the Vietnamese homeland, people, and culture.

Content

1. Overview of Symbols

From a cultural perspective, symbols are images and signs that carry multiple layers of profound meaning, contributing to the formation of the identity and character of each

culture. In essence, a culture is a system of symbols that are formed, transmitted, and enriched over time. Each community and each nation possesses its own symbolic system, reflecting distinctive ways of perceiving, thinking, and responding to the world. These symbols tend to be relatively stable and enduring, while also capable of evolving from “archetypes” and spreading across various domains such as art, beliefs, customs, and everyday life. Therefore, symbols are not only products of culture but also repositories that preserve and convey core values, shaping the unique identity of each nation.

In literary studies, the concept of symbol is approached from different perspectives. According to Wikipedia: “A symbol is a term used in aesthetics, literary theory, and linguistics. It is also referred to as symbolism, encompassing both broad and narrow meanings. In a broad sense, a symbol represents the characteristic way literature and art reflect life through imagery. In a narrow sense, a symbol is a mode of figurative expression or a special type of artistic image with strong expressive power, capable of both generalizing the essence of a phenomenon and conveying a conception, an idea, or a profound philosophy about human beings and life. A fundamental feature of this artistic image is that it recreates the world realistically while also bearing a high degree of conventionality” [5].

Thus, in literature, symbols can be understood as the encoding of linguistic signs through which authors express their thoughts and emotions about human beings and life. Through this process of “encoding” in language, writers embed their experiences, feelings, and reflections into symbols, thereby creating an interaction among life, the author, the work, and the reader.

From both cultural and literary perspectives, symbols play a crucial role in constructing and conveying meaning. They not only enrich the aesthetic value of literary works but also serve as a “key” to exploring cultural depth and collective consciousness. Within the rich symbolic system of

Vietnamese culture, betel and areca emerge as a representative symbol, embodying multiple layers of meaning related to emotions, moral values, and traditional customs. With its enduring vitality and evocative power, this symbol has become an abundant source of inspiration in literature, contributing to the expression of national cultural identity within the artistic flow.

The Significance of the Betel and Areca Symbol in Vietnamese Literature

1. Betel and Areca as a Symbol of Faithful Love and Deep Brotherhood

In Vietnamese rural life, especially in traditional society, betel and areca are not merely familiar items but also “companions” closely associated with family life through all its joys and sorrows. The betel quid, closely linked to the legend *The Story of Betel and Areca*, has long served as a medium of emotional connection, symbolizing the sacred bond among family members. This humanistic folk tale vividly portrays conjugal fidelity and brotherly affection through the intertwined images of the areca tree, the betel vine, and the stone.

Although the story begins with misunderstandings and separation, it ends with a meaningful reunion through transformation: the younger brother becomes a stone, the elder brother transforms into an areca tree, and the wife becomes a betel vine clinging tightly around the tree. This detail not only resolves the narrative but also carries profound symbolic significance: family bonds, though tested, remain enduring, faithful, and inseparable. The image of the betel vine entwining the areca tree symbolizes steadfast marital love, while the stone evokes lasting brotherhood. Thus, betel and areca transcend their material existence to become symbols of connection, extending beyond the family to the wider community.

Beyond *The Story of Betel and Areca*, the image of betel also appears in other folk literary works, notably the fairy tale *Tam and Cam*. In this story, the betel quid folded in the shape of a phoenix wing becomes a meaningful sign that helps the king recognize Tam—his faithful wife. This small yet significant detail evokes memory and affection, ultimately leading to the lovers’ reunion. Hence, the betel quid is not merely a daily item but also a symbol of enduring love and fidelity in Vietnamese spiritual life.

From these two representative stories, it can be seen that betel and areca affirm their profound symbolic value in expressing family affection and traditional moral principles. The betel quid serves as a bridge connecting relationships, a medium for conveying love, sharing, and mutual understanding. In modern life, this value continues, especially in wedding ceremonies, where the image of the phoenix-shaped betel quid symbolizes not only aesthetic beauty but also good fortune, reunion, and wishes for a lasting marriage.

In short, betel and areca are not only symbols of family unity but also cultural symbols with deep communal significance. They contribute to reflecting and preserving the noble traditional values that define the unique identity of the Vietnamese nation.

2. Betel and Areca as a Medium for Building Communal Bonds

Beyond merely strengthening family ties, betel and areca also function as a bridge that connects neighbors and fosters

communal solidarity. The warm, pungent taste of the betel quid, with its vivid red hue, seems to bring people closer together, making it easier to share, empathize, and understand one another. Offering betel often serves as a pretext for initiating acquaintance, replacing formal greetings and conveying the host’s sincerity and affection toward guests:

“Meeting each other, let us share a betel quid, as a token of affection for future greetings.”

Or:

“Since we are here, let us share a betel quid. May I ask where your hometown is?”

According to folk belief, “a betel quid begins the conversation”; therefore, in traditional encounters, betel and areca held a particularly important role. From the very first meeting, people would often begin by offering betel, even before serving tea or sweets, as is common today. This act was not merely ritualistic but also expressed hospitality, openness, and goodwill. The warmth and spiciness of the betel quid seemed to dissolve initial hesitation, making interactions more natural, intimate, and connected.

Through the exchange of betel, people had opportunities to learn about one another, share experiences, and strengthen relationships. This practice was not only a custom but also a manifestation of respect, affection, and the refined cultural behavior of the Vietnamese people. Thus, betel and areca extend beyond bonding small communities to becoming a strong connective thread across society as a whole.

Since ancient times, betel and areca have been present throughout the country, becoming an indispensable part of Vietnamese daily life. From royalty to commoners, from the elderly to the middle-aged, everyone was familiar with the custom of chewing betel, many even considering it an essential habit. Thanks to the “betel quid that begins the conversation,” social distances were shortened, sincerity was fostered, and a spirit of unity was cultivated—from families and villages to the entire nation. This represents the profound and enduring cultural value of betel and areca in Vietnamese life.

3. Betel and Areca as a Bridge of Love and Matchmaking

The symbol of betel and areca embodies multiple layers of deep meaning. Beyond representing communal unity, it also serves as a “bridge” for romantic union in Vietnamese spiritual life. For generations, romantic affection has been subtly expressed through folk songs:

“We are like betel and areca,

With lime to redden lips—what could compare?”

This folk verse functions as a delicate yet profound confession of love. The comparison between “we two” and “betel and areca” affirms harmony and compatibility. The line “With lime to redden lips—what could compare?” evokes a perfect union, emphasizing that such a bond is unique, enduring, and irreplaceable. Through this, the young man employs a familiar cultural symbol to express his feelings in a subtle yet meaningful way.

This motif appears widely in Vietnamese folk literature:

“Entering the garden to pick green areca fruits,
Splitting them into six to invite you to share betel.

This betel is of intention, of affection,

Betel of phoenix and dragon—betel for us to be together.”

Here, the young woman skillfully uses the betel quid to express her feelings. The invitation is both discreet and

open, reflecting refinement in communication. The phrase “betel for us to be together” gently conveys a desire for union. In traditional culture, betel folded in the shape of a phoenix wing often appears in wedding ceremonies, symbolizing harmony, happiness, and longevity. Thus, even without direct expression, the image of betel implies a serious relationship oriented toward marriage.

The symbolism is further illustrated in the folk song “Drawing Water at the Communal Yard”:

“When you marry, I will help you:

A basket of sticky rice,

A fat pig, a jar of fine wine.

A pair of mats for you to lie on,

A pair of blankets, a pair of earrings.

Eight coins for the bride price,

Five coins for the wedding, along with a cluster of areca.”

In this sincere declaration, the image of the “areca cluster” serves as an important cultural sign, affirming the young man’s intention to build a lasting relationship and a family. Beyond personal emotion, the verse reflects traditional wedding customs in which betel and areca are indispensable symbols of marital happiness.

In modern literature, this symbol continues to be inherited and creatively developed. In the poem “Yearning” (Trương tú), poet Nguyễn Bính employs it to express longing:

“Your house has a betel vine,

Mine has a row of areca trees.

Đoài village misses Đông village,

Does the areca of Đoài not miss the betel of Đông?”

Here, the betel vine and areca trees become metaphors for lovers, while longing is depicted as the entwining of the vine around the tree. This simple yet refined expression highlights deep emotional yearning and demonstrates the enduring vitality of the betel–areca symbol in Vietnamese poetry.

From folk songs to modern poetry, the symbol of betel and areca consistently plays a vital role in expressing romantic love. It is not only an aesthetic image but also a bond that carries enduring cultural values, resonating like a gentle melody that touches the reader’s soul and reveals the beauty of love and human connection.

4. Betel and Areca as an Expression of Feminist Consciousness and Women’s Aspiration for Happiness

Literature bears the noble mission of exploring and portraying the inner world of human beings. Through the power of language, writers not only reflect reality but also articulate profound thoughts, aspirations, and emotions. This is clearly seen in the poem “Invitation to Betel” by Hồ Xuân Hương:

“Small areca nut, a piece of betel,

This one Xuân Hương has already prepared.

If we are destined, let it grow deeper,

Do not be green like leaves, nor pale like lime.”

From the very title, the poem evokes a familiar cultural space where “the betel quid begins the conversation.” Building upon this tradition, Hồ Xuân Hương creatively transforms the betel quid into an artistic symbol representing faithful love and enduring attachment. The image of the “small areca nut” combined with the “piece of betel” not only reflects reality but also suggests the fragile and precarious fate of women in feudal society. Her voice thus emerges as a profound expression of women’s inner lives and aspirations.

The line “This one Xuân Hương has already prepared” stands out as a bold artistic statement. The demonstrative “this” creates immediacy, while the self-naming “Xuân Hương” reveals a strong, assertive individuality—rare in her time. The verb “prepared” (quết) further emphasizes her confidence and initiative in love. In a society where women’s voices were suppressed, her poetry becomes a powerful affirmation of selfhood and dignity.

The following line, “If we are destined, let it grow deeper,” conveys both tenderness and determination, expressing a belief in mutual commitment. Meanwhile, the closing line, “Do not be green like leaves, nor pale like lime,” warns against fickleness and betrayal—common anxieties in love, especially for women in a patriarchal society. It serves as both a personal plea and a broader critique of emotional insincerity.

Thus, through “Invitation to Betel,” Hồ Xuân Hương not only expresses a longing for sincere and faithful love but also articulates a strong awareness of personal value. Her poetry becomes both an individual voice and a collective voice for women who were marginalized in the past, highlighting humanistic ideals and early feminist consciousness in Vietnamese literature.

Studying the betel and areca symbol in her poetry allows us to better understand its aesthetic value and cultural depth. Beyond symbolizing love and attachment, it also becomes a medium through which the poet conveys aspirations for happiness and personal identity. This is a meaningful cultural value that future generations should continue to explore, preserve, and promote, contributing to the richness of Vietnamese cultural identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of the betel and areca symbol in Vietnamese literature enables us to gain a deeper understanding of the nation’s traditional cultural values. Betel and areca are not only familiar elements of daily life but also serve as a “binding agent” that connects people, forming a strong bridge between generations and fostering mutual understanding and sharing within the community. Embedded within this symbol are profound humanistic values: it represents love, embodies artistic expression, reflects human character and personality, and reveals the depth of the soul as well as the aspiration toward ideal beauty.

Moreover, betel and areca contribute to highlighting the distinctive identity of Vietnamese culture, demonstrating the close relationship between literature and life—where literature originates from reality and, in turn, enriches human spiritual life. Through such symbols, literature becomes a spiritual foundation, inspiring a love for nature, life, and art in every individual.

With this awareness, we come to appreciate more deeply the beauty of the betel and areca symbol, while also recognizing our responsibility to preserve and promote traditional cultural values. However, in the contemporary context, many young people have not fully understood the profound meanings of this symbol, leading to misconceptions that gradually erode national cultural identity. This reality underscores the urgent need to raise awareness and disseminate these valuable cultural meanings within the community.

As young individuals, we are fully aware of our role in preserving and promoting the nation’s cultural heritage.

From understanding to appreciation and action, we aspire to spread love for our homeland, people, and culture, so that traditional values such as the betel and areca symbol continue to be preserved, developed, and shine in modern life, while also contributing to introducing Vietnam to the international community.

References

1. Lai NA. (Ed.). 150 literary terms. Hanoi, Vietnam: Vietnam National University Press, 1999.
2. Nguyen TB. Customs and festivals of the Vietnamese people. Hanoi, Vietnam: Culture and Information Publishing House, 2012.
3. Nguyen DC. The treasury of Vietnamese fairy tales. Hanoi, Vietnam: Education Publishing House, 2021.
4. Trinh BD. (Ed.). From signs to symbols. Hanoi, Vietnam: Social Sciences Publishing House, 2017.
5. Lu HN. Ho Xuan Huong: Poetry and life. Hanoi, Vietnam: Literature Publishing House, 2005.
6. Tuden Wiki. (n.d.). Symbol. Retrieved from, 2026. <https://tudienwiki.com/bieu-tuong>