

<a href="https://doi.org/10.24035/ijit.29.2026.353">https://doi.org/10.24035/ijit.29.2026.353</a>			
Received:	30 November 2025	Accepted:	17 February 2026
Revised:	02 January 2026	Published:	15 June 2026
Volume:	29 (June)	Pages:	75-86
<b>To cite:</b> Hoàng Thị Thùy Dương & Lê Thị Hiền. 2026. Islamic symbols in <i>Salam! Greetings to Persia</i> by Hồ Anh Thái. <i>International Journal of Islamic Thought</i> . Vol. 29 (June): 75-86.			

## Islamic Symbols in *Salam! Greetings to Persia* by Hồ Anh Thái

HOÀNG THỊ THÙY DƯƠNG\*<sup>1</sup> & LÊ THỊ HIỀN<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

*Islamic symbols are a profound source of spiritual and artistic inspiration in world literature. Salam! Greetings to Persia by Hồ Anh Thái records the author's journey to Iran, exploring layers of cultural, historical, and religious meaning. This study investigates how Islamic symbols function in the work through three dimensions – spiritual, ritual, and material – employing symbolic and myth criticism as interpretive frameworks. The analysis identifies recurring images such as light, prayer, and journey as narrative codes that express the author's engagement with Persian culture. Findings show that these symbols not only embody Islamic spiritual and cultural values but are also reinterpreted through a modern Vietnamese sensibility, reflecting intercultural dialogue. This study contributes to understanding how Vietnamese literature interacts with Islamic civilization and broadens the comparative scope of contemporary travel writing. By decoding these symbolic layers, the research highlights Hồ Anh Thái's creative approach to cross-cultural representation.*

**Keywords:**

*Hồ Anh Thái, Islamic symbols, Iran, Persia, Vietnam.*

### Introduction

Islam, one of the world's major religions, emerged in the seventh century on the Arabian Peninsula. Beyond its theological system, Islam has evolved into a profound civilization influencing politics, art, and literature. Its artistic heritage – from architecture and calligraphy to poetry – is deeply symbolic, blending spirituality with aesthetic beauty.

Within the current of modern Vietnamese literature, Islamic elements do not occupy a central position but appear subtly and meaningfully. They are occasionally reflected in travelogues or essays written by authors who have lived or worked in Muslim-majority countries – for instance, Hồ Anh

<sup>1</sup>HOÀNG THỊ THÙY DƯƠNG\*, (Corresponding Author), Ph. D., Faculty of Linguistics and Literature, Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, 280 An Duong Vuong Street, Cho Quan Ward, Ho Chi Minh City, VIETNAM. Email: duonghtt@hcmue.edu.vn [ORCID iD: 0009-0009-0363-2525].

<sup>2</sup>LÊ THỊ HIỀN, Ph. D., Faculty of Education, Hong Duc University, 565 Quang Trung Street, Hac Thanh Ward, Thanh Hoa Province, VIETNAM. Email: lethihien@hdu.edu.vn [ORCID iD: 0009-0005-7509-9847].

Thái during his time in Iran. Born in 1960 in Vietnam, Hồ Anh Thái is among the prominent figures of contemporary Vietnamese literature. He is recognized for his creative vigor, sharp engagement with socio-cultural issues, and his ability to blend realism with philosophical depth. Owing to his extensive diplomatic experiences, his writings extend beyond Vietnamese life to diverse cultural landscapes, particularly India, the Middle East, and Muslim societies. His works are marked by an intercultural dialogic spirit, expressed in a witty, insightful, and philosophically nuanced style. Such intercultural sensitivity provides the foundation for his representation of Islamic culture in *Salam! Greetings to Persia*.

Among his works, *Salam! Greetings to Persia* (2013) stands out as a distinctive travelogue. In this book, Hồ Anh Thái deliberately uses the phrase “Persia” instead of “Iran,” thereby evoking both geographical and literary-historical resonances. The term recalls the grandeur of ancient Persia – a once powerful empire renowned for its diverse culture, remarkable architecture, and artistic achievements. For Vietnamese readers, “Persia” has become a familiar cultural image associated with mosques, mausoleums, dynasties, and traditions. By adopting this term, the author preserves the historical and cultural aura of the region. Having visited Iran twice (in 1994 and 2011), Hồ Anh Thái grounds his narrative in direct experiences, offering a vivid reconstruction of Iran’s geography, history, and culture, while opening a multifaceted view into the spiritual life, customs, and practices of a contemporary Islamic society.

Even in its title, the book conveys its religious and cultural focus: “‘Salam’ has become the universal greeting among Muslims around the world” (Hồ 2013: 4). *Salam! Greetings to Persia* thus serves as a bridge enabling Vietnamese readers to approach and better understand Islamic culture, people, and religion at one of its global centers. As the author declares:

“In this book, I want to guide readers through the vast land of West Asia, a cradle of human civilization, the source of inspiration for countless stories in *One Thousand and One Nights*, and especially in *One Thousand and One Days*. Ancient Persia (also called Pars, Fars...) with its millennia-old tradition of carpet weaving, nomadic animal husbandry—which provided wool for weaving, leather crafts, and the famous kebab cuisine—its centuries of metallurgy and craftsmanship, and its flourishing Persian language, gave rise to some of humanity’s greatest scientists, philosophers, and poets such as Omar Khayyam, Saadi, Ferdowsi, Rumi, and Hafez” (Hồ 2013: 6–7).

In *Salam! Greetings to Persia*, Islamic symbols play a central role in representing religious elements, leaving a profound spiritual imprint on the work. These symbols reconstruct the religious, ethical, and aesthetic foundations of Muslim communities, offering Vietnamese readers a vivid and relatable perspective on the Islamic worldview—one often perceived from a geographical and cultural distance. This article examines how Islamic symbols in Hồ Anh Thái’s *Salam! Greetings to Persia* convey religious, cultural, and ethical meanings, reflecting Vietnam’s literary engagement with the Islamic world.

### Literature Review

Internationally, numerous studies have examined Islamic symbolism from various perspectives. Abuaemar (2017) analyzes religious symbols in Islamic art, emphasizing the relationship between visual form and spiritual belief. Muslih-Dien and Hameed (2019) investigate the symbolic power of the Quran through literary analysis, clarifying the meanings of motifs such as the moon, colors, fire, and death. Chosinawarotin (2024) provides a systematic review of aesthetics, symbolism, and cultural meanings in Islamic art and architecture, thereby demonstrating the depth of visual signs in religious life. Ghaffar and Sahib (2025) focus on the sacralization of symbols in Islamic practice and their impact on believers’ faith. Collectively, these studies establish an important foundation for identifying and interpreting Islamic symbols in art, architecture, and scripture. However, no research has yet explored Islamic symbolism in Vietnamese literature. Jezzini (2023) further explores Quranic symbolism in classical Arabic poetry, showing how Abbasid poets incorporated Quranic symbols into

their verse as a means of expressing moral and spiritual ideals. Similarly, Ferdinal, Oktavianus, and Zahid (2023) reveal how Islamic values are conveyed through metaphorical language in *Di Bawah Lindungan Ka'bah* by Hamka, illustrating the continuity of Islamic symbolism in modern literature with ethical and aesthetic depth. Collectively, these studies establish an important foundation for identifying and interpreting Islamic symbols in art, architecture, and literature. However, no research has yet explored Islamic symbolism in Vietnamese literature.

In Vietnam, scholarship on Hồ Anh Thái has primarily centered on his stylistic characteristics, with no work directly addressing Islamic symbols in *Salam! Greetings to Persia*. Nguyễn Văn Hạnh (2023) situates Hồ Anh Thái within the broader context of Vietnam's contemporary literary integration, while Lê Thị Hương (2015) approaches his novels from an intersemiotic perspective. Several dissertations and theses have also contributed to understanding his writing: Trần Quang Hạng (2018) studies postmodern elements in Hồ Anh Thái's and Haruki Murakami's works; Nguyễn Thị Bích Thủy (2016) examines Hồ Anh Thái's prose through an intercultural lens. Despite these valuable contributions, studies on Hồ Anh Thái have largely focused on stylistic, postmodern, or intercultural aspects, rather than on his representation of religious or symbolic systems. Although these works provide significant methodological and theoretical insights, they leave open a research gap concerning Islamic symbols in *Salam! Greetings to Persia*.

Thus, the study of Islamic symbolism in Hồ Anh Thái's *Salam! Greetings to Persia* remains an unaddressed area in Vietnamese literary scholarship. This article aims to decode the system of Islamic symbols in the work across three dimensions: spiritual, ritual, and material. On this basis, it reveals the relationship between symbols and the cultural–social context of Iran and the wider world. The Islamic symbols in *Salam! Greetings to Persia* are simultaneously religious and “literarized,” becoming both aesthetic materials and cultural experiences. The interplay of spirituality, ritual, and materiality enables the work to portray a multidimensional picture of Islamic life, while also demonstrating how a Vietnamese author interprets the Islamic world through a humanistic and accessible lens.

### Research Methodology

This paper employs a combination of methods to ensure both comprehensiveness and reliability in the analysis.

First, the study adopts symbolic criticism as its primary methodological orientation to examine Islamic symbols in Hồ Anh Thái's *Salam! Greetings to Persia*. Symbolic criticism goes beyond decoding a literary image; it approaches symbols as multilayered, polysemic, and intertextual cultural–ideological phenomena intrinsically tied to the religious and spiritual life of a community. It is an interdisciplinary approach intersecting with religious studies, psychoanalysis, myth criticism, poetics, and cultural anthropology. Scholars have affirmed that symbols are not merely the products of primitive thought but play a vital role in all epochs of human life. According to Monneyron and Thomas, mythological symbols belong to the unconscious and persist over time: “all civilizations are essentially symbolic, and indeed should be seen as founded upon symbols” (Monneyron & Thomas 2002: 69); “the unconscious may be discovered not only in the highest literary works but also in popular culture” (Monneyron & Thomas 2002: 69); and “symbols act as unifying forces, revitalizing both the individual and the community” (Monneyron & Thomas 2002: 100). Chevalier and Gheerbrant's *Dictionary of world cultural symbols: Myths, dreams, customs, gestures, forms, images, colors, numbers* (1992) provide a comprehensive system of universal symbols and their emblematic meanings. In addition, insights from Vietnamese scholarship are also drawn upon. For instance, Trịnh Bá Đĩnh in *From Signs to Symbols* (2018) traces the transformation of linguistic signs into cultural symbols in literary works, affirming that: “Symbols exist in literature as tools of artistic construction, but they are themselves texts; they have their own structure, their own history, and a relative independence from other elements in the system of the literary text” (Trịnh 2018: 36). Based on this

orientation, this paper surveys Islamic symbols in Hồ Anh Thái's work, identifying and analyzing representative examples.

Second, the paper employs myth criticism to further investigate Islamic symbols in *Salam! Greetings to Persia*. Myth criticism provides an overarching perspective on how symbols participate in trans-cultural symbolic patterns, thereby situating Islamic literature in dialogue with world literature. Myth critics argue that mythological narratives and symbols are preserved to regulate social order and sustain harmony between humans, nature, and society: "Myth is not merely history retold or an allegorical narrative; for indigenous peoples it endures as a 'revelation,' a living reality that affects the destiny of humankind and the world" (Meletinsky 2004: 38). Mircea Eliade, in *Treatise on the History of Religions* (1949), contends that humans perceive the world through divine, human, material, spatial, and temporal symbols of the sacred. He further distinguishes the sacred from the profane: the sacred is opposed to the profane as existence to non-existence, the absolute to the relative, the eternal to the transient. For Eliade, this polarity constitutes the foundation of all religions. Moreover, sacred symbols are always embedded within rituals, for without ritual preparation, contact with the sacred poses danger: "One cannot approach a sacred or impure object while remaining in a profane condition; ritual preparation is indispensable" (Eliade 2018: 42). In this paper, myth criticism serves as a theoretical framework to decode Islamic symbols in Hồ Anh Thái's *Salam! Greetings to Persia*, situating them within the global symbolic-mythological system.

Finally, the paper also applies analysis and synthesis to clarify the role of Islamic symbols in Hồ Anh Thái's work.

In terms of research procedure, the study proceeds through three analytical steps:

(1) Text selection – the analysis focuses on *Salam! Greetings to Persia* in its entirety, with particular attention to passages where Islamic symbols appear most prominently, categorized into three main dimensions: spiritual, ritual, and material. Hồ Anh Thái's work *Salam! Greetings to Persia* was chosen as it is the Vietnamese work directly engaging with Persian-Islamic culture.

(2) Symbolic coding – Islamic symbols were identified and categorized into three major groups: spiritual, ritual, and material, based on their narrative context, frequency, and symbolic function.

(3) Interpretive strategy – each symbol was examined through a combination of symbolic criticism and myth criticism, moving from textual description to symbolic interpretation and cultural contextualization.

### Findings and Discussion

In *Salam! Greetings to Persia*, Hồ Anh Thái not only records his personal experiences of living and working in Iran but also reconstructs a richly symbolic portrait of the Islamic world. These symbols do not exist in isolation; rather, they are interwoven into layers of space, time, and emotion, simultaneously reflecting the depth of religious life and portraying the cultural identity of Iran. They emerge from core spiritual values, extend through daily religious rituals, and crystallize in material elements imbued with both aesthetic and sacred significance.

The analysis of Islamic symbols in the work is approached through three dimensions—spiritual, ritual, and material. This examination not only clarifies how the author engages with and interprets an unfamiliar civilization but also highlights the capacity of travel literature to construct "cultural bridges" between Vietnam and the Islamic world.

#### Symbols of the Spiritual Dimension / Philosophy of Life in the Work

##### *Salam! Greetings to Persia* by Hồ Anh Thái

The Iranian people embody the lived experience of contemporary Islam: "Muslims account for 99.4% of Iran's roughly 75 million population (2011 data). Of these, 90% follow Shia Islam, while the remainder are Sunni. Thus, Iran's Islamic polity is among the rare Shia-based states in the world" (Hồ

2013: 56). As the author notes, “On one hand, Iranians are stoic and devout; on the other, they cherish poetry, cuisine, and the beauty of nature” (Hò 2013: 11). In *Salam! Greetings to Persia*, Hò Anh Thái highlights the spiritual symbols of Islam – those that shape the Iranian worldview and spiritual life. These include Allah (the Supreme God), Muhammad (the final Prophet), the Quran (the revealed scripture), Imams and Saints, Angels (Mala’ika), and the Day of Judgment (Qiyamah).

According to Eliade (1949), the sacred does not manifest directly within profane existence but only “reveals itself” through symbols, myths, and rituals – media through which human beings can encounter the sacred. From this perspective, Islamic religious symbols serve as points of reference through which believers access and commune with the divine. They are not only sacred but also function as instruments that preserve spiritual order, harmonize personal life, and sustain the cohesion of the Muslim community.

Foremost among these symbols is Allah – the Supreme Being. As the core of faith and the ultimate moral reference, the symbol of Allah embodies absolute devotion. In *Salam! Greetings to Persia*, the word “Allah” appears 16 times. It is present in the shahada, the central declaration of faith: “There is no deity but Allah, and Muhammad is His Messenger” (Hò 2013: 67). It is inscribed on Iran’s national flag: “The flag consists of three equal horizontal bands of green, white, and red. Centered on the white band is a red emblem representing the word Allah, stylized in the form of a tulip – the symbol of martyrdom” (Hò 2013: 299). Allah is also invoked as the point of reference for human duty and morality: “Prayer is man’s obligation before Allah” (Hò 2013: 67).

Thus, the pervasive presence of the symbol of Allah – extending from the metaphysical realm to social reality, from individual belief to collective identity – demonstrates its centrality. By foregrounding Allah, Hò Anh Thái not only recreates a core aspect of Persian-Islamic culture but also underscores its binding power across spiritual, ethical, and political dimensions of Iranian life.

Alongside this, the image of Mohammad – the final Prophet – is depicted as a moral exemplar of virtue, patience, and compassion. He serves as an enduring source of ethical inspiration for the community of believers. In *Salam! Greetings Persia*, the symbol of Mohammad is mentioned 31 times. It appears prominently in the profession of faith: “One must declare that “There is no god but Allah, and Mohammad is His Prophet”” (Hò 2013: 68). Hò Anh Thái also recounts the Prophet’s biography and his immense contributions to Islam and Iran with deep reverence: “Following in the footsteps of the Prophet Mohammad, who continues to guide all humanity until the Day of Judgment” (Hò 2013: 67). Quran

In *Salam! Greetings to Persia*, Hò Anh Thái further portrays the Quran as the central symbol of the Islamic spiritual life. It is mentioned 28 times throughout the work. More than a sacred scripture, the Quran functions as a moral compass, guiding the ethics and conduct of believers – from the smallest daily actions to the collective preservation of communal norms: “It demands righteous deeds from humans, and prohibits evil by pointing to the straight path in life” (Hò 2013: 70). The author observes that the Quran is not only recited during religious rituals but is also omnipresent in the social space: verses are displayed in households, shops, or even pasted on vehicles. This omnipresence functions both as a talismanic protection and as a constant reminder of Allah’s presence: “The Koran gave rise to a calligraphic tradition, creating beautiful scripts to transcribe its verses” (Hò 2013: 69). For the faithful, reciting the Quran each morning or during festivals becomes a bridge that connects them with the Divine, bringing purification and inner peace: “Prayer purifies the soul, restrains temptation, and prevents evil deeds” (Hò 2013: 67). From Hò Anh Thái’s perspective, the Quran emerges as a profound spiritual symbol – a philosophy of life that reflects the cultural identity of Iran.

Alongside Allah, Muhammad, and the Quran, the work also highlights the role of the Imams as spiritual guides and protectors of the community: “after the Prophet Muhammad passed away, proper spiritual guidance was entrusted to twelve succeeding prophets, known as the Twelve Imams” (Hò 2013: 61). They not only led in interpreting the Quran but also served as sources of spiritual support

in everyday life. The symbol of the Imams appears sixty-nine times in *Salam! Greetings to Persia*. The author recounts the biographies of various Imams such as Imam Khomeini, Imam Khamenei, Imam Hossein, Imam Reza, and Imam Mahdi, as well as shrines and contemporary structures associated with them, including the Imam Mosque.

Among them, Khomeini is depicted as a central figure of the era: the architect of the theocratic regime of the Islamic Republic and a lasting influence on the social order of Iran today. In the 1920s, Khomeini attained the rank of Ayatollah – the highest position in the Shia clerical hierarchy – while writing and teaching. He was also a poet, publishing mystical Sufi-inspired collections. As the spiritual leader of the Iranian people, he rose to political power in 1979, becoming the head of the Islamic state until his death in 1989: “Today he is called Imam Khomeini, elevated to the rank of saint (Imam). Almost every Iranian city has a street named after Khomeini” (Hỗ 2013: 43).

The birth and death anniversaries of many Imams are celebrated as national holidays in Iran: “May 24: the birth of Imam Ali; June 5: the death of Imam Kazem; June 24: the birth of Imam Zaman; July 30: the death of Imam Ali; September 2: the death of Imam Jafar” (Hỗ 2013: 301). These commemorations affirm their eternal role in the collective consciousness of the people. Thus, the Imam symbol transcends its religious significance, crystallizing spiritual and political authority, and reflecting how Iranian history, faith, and identity are organized around these saintly leaders.

Through his portrayal of spiritual symbols – the philosophical foundations of Islamic life such as Allah, Muhammad, the Quran, and the Imams – Hổ Anh Thái offers readers a multidimensional picture of Iran’s spiritual life. These symbols function not only as religious emblems but also as fundamental pillars shaping lifestyle, morality, and cultural identity. Their pervasive presence throughout the narrative demonstrates that the author is not merely recording reality but carefully conveying the spiritual essence of Persian-Islamic culture. As a result, *Salam! Greetings to Persia* is not simply a travelogue, but a journey into the worldview of Islam. In Iran, these spiritual symbols serve as anchors through which people find faith, serenity, and the strength to overcome life’s challenges.

From a Vietnamese perspective, the spiritual symbols of Islam in *Salam! Greetings to Persia* are not merely religious signs. They become points of human connection between two civilizations. Through the narrator’s eyes, Islam appears not as something distant or foreign but as a world of faith, peace, and moral goodness. These values deeply resonate with the Vietnamese spiritual tradition that honors compassion, harmony, and respect for life.

#### Symbols in Rituals and Religious Practices in the Work *Salam! Greetings to Persia* by Hổ Anh Thái

If, on the spiritual level, symbols shape faith, then on the ritual level, they are embodied in concrete practices that connect individuals with God and the community. In *Salam! Greetings to Persia*, Hổ Anh Thái vividly portrays symbols associated with Islamic rituals and religious practices such as the declaration of faith; daily prayers; the Ramadan fast; pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca; the Ashura festival commemorating the Imams; Quranic practices such as recitation, inscribing and displaying verses, treating the Quran as a talisman; attending the mosque; joining communal Friday prayers; and commemorative ceremonies associated with the Prophet and the Imams.

According to scholar Mircea Eliade, in human consciousness time manifests in two dimensions: the sacred and the profane. Profane time refers to physical, historical time bound to everyday life. Sacred time, by contrast, refers to mythic moments of divine creation or to the intervals when humans can connect with transcendent forces—such as during rituals: “Through ritual, one can move from profane time to sacred time by means of ceremonial acts” (Eliade 2005: 198). Applying Eliade’s insight on the coexistence of sacred and profane time, one can see how Islamic rituals enable believers to step outside the flow of daily life and merge into a sacred dimension.

Religious rituals, as observed and described by Hồ Anh Thái in *Salam! Greetings to Persia*, reflect the profound spiritual life of Iranians and form a rich symbolic system of Islam. In this work, the author refers to prayer 22 times: “Prayer purifies the soul, prevents temptation that leads to evil and wrongdoing. Men should pray five times a day at the mosque within the congregation. Women may pray wherever convenient. The mosque is a pure place reserved for prayer” (Hồ 2013: 67). Prayer is the central ritual, performed five times daily, each session beginning with ablution—washing the hands, face, and feet. This act is not merely about personal hygiene, but about purifying both body and spirit before standing in the presence of Allah. Ablution thus functions as a symbolic cleansing: each prayer begins with purification, embodying both practical and spiritual renewal.

In this way, prayer becomes a sacred rhythm interwoven into everyday life, enabling individuals to transcend ordinary existence and enter a space where the sacred and the profane converge. Rituals in the narrative therefore not only mirror the inner depth of Iranian Muslim spirituality but also stand as vivid symbols of faith and communal cohesion.

If daily prayer serves as a ritual that enables believers to connect directly with Allah, then pilgrimage constitutes a ritual intimately tied to the collective memory and spiritual origins of the Shia Muslim community. Hồ Anh Thái vividly depicts the solemn and crowded atmosphere at sacred mausoleums, where streams of pilgrims patiently wait for the chance to touch the holy space, to whisper prayers, and to seek divine protection. These pilgrimages are not merely geographical journeys but also inner spiritual quests, in which individuals return to the traditions and history of their community. As the *Dictionary of world cultural symbols: Myths, dreams, customs, gestures, forms, images, colors, numbers of notes*, the tomb symbolizes the connection between the human world and eternity: “Whether humble as a mound of earth or towering like a pyramid, the tomb recalls the symbolic meaning of the mountain. Each tomb is a more modest version of the sacred mountain, a castle containing life” (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 2002: 596).

In *Salam! Greetings to Persia*, the author describes numerous shrines, such as the Hazrat-e-Masumeh complex; the mausoleum of Imam Reza in Mashhad; the tomb of Imam Reza’s sister in Qom; and the mausoleum of Khomeini, adorned with four minarets and a golden dome. Visiting these shrines is considered an indispensable journey in the life of every believer: “In Qom, one must visit the Hazrat-e-Masumeh shrine. This is the resting place of Imam Reza’s sister, who passed away in the ninth century. Pilgrims from across the country and neighboring regions come here to pay homage” (Hồ 2013: 249). The work also portrays the shrine of Imam Reza, where twelve centuries after the Imam’s martyrdom, both pilgrims and visitors cannot hold back their tears. This scene reveals that, in the consciousness of the faithful, the Imam’s sacrifice never fades but is continually reenacted in the present, reviving sacred memory and reinforcing the strength of collective faith. Around the shrine of Imam Reza, “twelve centuries have passed since the Imam’s martyrdom, yet tears still stream down the faces of those who come to visit, as if he had just departed” (Hồ 2013: 244). The act of visiting shrines, therefore, becomes a sacred ritual—simultaneously an act of remembrance and a reaffirmation of communal identity within the cultural landscape of Shia Islam in Iran.

In most rituals, water retains its familiar symbolic role, embodying both purification and the boundary between the profane and the sacred. It serves as a transitional element, preparing believers to turn wholly toward God. According to the *Dictionary of world cultural symbols: Myths, dreams, customs, gestures, forms, images, colors, numbers*, the archetype of water carries multiple meanings: “The symbolic meanings of water can be reduced to three dominant themes: source of life, means of purification, and center of regeneration. These three themes are commonly found in the most ancient myths and give rise to the richest and most coherent clusters of images” (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 2002: 709). Similarly, *The Origins of Religious* asserts: “Immersion in water symbolizes regression into the pre-formal, total regeneration, a new birth; for submersion is equivalent to the dissolution of forms, to reintegration into the pre-existential mode of the formless; and emergence repeats the cosmogonic act of manifestation” (Eliade 2018: 212).

In *Salam! Greetings to Persia*, the symbolism of water is most clearly expressed in its role of purification within Islamic religious life. Before each prayer, believers must perform wudu—washing the hands, mouth, face, and feet with water. This is not merely a matter of physical hygiene but a ritual of spiritual cleansing, preparing the soul for communion with Allah. Hồ Anh Thái closely observed and recorded how Iranians, upon entering the mosque, wash their hands and feet at faucets located in the courtyard, making water the threshold into the sacred realm: “Along the side of every mosque is a row of taps flowing into a channel lined with white ceramic tiles. Before praying, people must sit properly at the taps, wash their faces, hands, and feet, so that their bodies are clean before stepping into the mosque” (Hồ 2013: 219).

Thus, the symbols associated with religious rituals and practices in *Salam! Greetings to Persia* are portrayed by Hồ Anh Thái as bridges that connect human beings with the Divine. At the same time, these symbols bind together the community of believers within a shared sacred value system. From daily prayers, pilgrimages, visits to shrines, to the act of purification with water – all carry profound religious meaning. These actions also evoke the operation of sacred time, in which individuals step out of the ordinary world to be reborn in faith and in collective memory. Here, religious symbols exist not only as ritual forms but also as sources of spiritual energy that sustain communal vitality and shape the distinct cultural identity of Iranian Islam.

In depicting Islamic rituals, Hồ Anh Thái goes beyond ethnographic observation. He interprets rituals as living expressions of discipline, devotion, and collective faith. From a Vietnamese cultural lens, these rituals mirror the communal ethics and moral self-cultivation valued in Eastern traditions. They reveal how spiritual practice can sustain identity and social harmony within a globalized world.

#### Symbols in the Material / Visual Dimension in the Work *Salam! Greetings to Persia* by Hồ Anh Thái

In *Salam! Greetings to Persia*, Hồ Anh Thái depicts numerous material and visual symbols associated with Islam and Iranian culture. Notable examples include: the Iranian national flag with the word Allah stylized into the form of a tulip; mosques (Masjid) with domes and minarets; the mausoleums of revered Imams (such as Imam Reza and Imam Khomeini); Islamic architectural works featuring mosaic tile art and Quranic calligraphy; Arabic script in the form of Quranic calligraphy; ceremonial banners used during Ashura; traditional Islamic attire (the chador, hijab, and clerical robes); as well as religious objects such as prayer beads, prayer rugs, and Quranic verses displayed in homes or affixed to vehicles.

In *Salam! Greetings to Persia*, Hồ Anh Thái devotes many pages to describing architectural works and images imbued with Islamic characteristics, thereby reconstructing a visual world that is at once magnificent and sacred. Mosques are mentioned forty-one times. In *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade discusses the manifestation of the sacred across different cosmic levels such as sky, water, and earth. According to him, the sacred emerges when an object is detached from the surrounding profane reality; it ceases to be an ordinary, mundane thing. More specifically, “everything that is unusual, singular, novel, perfect, or strange becomes a vessel of magical or religious power, or depending on circumstances, becomes an object of veneration or fear, based on the ambivalent sense aroused by the sacred” (Eliade 2018: 40). Furthermore, “the sacred is qualitatively different from the profane; nevertheless, it can manifest itself in any manner, in any place, within the profane temporal world” (Eliade 2018: 59).

As Chevalier and Gheerbrant observe, “Temples and mosques are reflections of the divine world. Their architecture embodies human conceptions of the sacred: the vibrancy of life in Hindu temples, the sense of measure in the Acropolis, wisdom and love in Christian cathedrals, and the union of heaven and earth in Islamic mosques” (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 2002: 298). Applying the

perspectives of Eliade, Chevalier, and Gheerbrant to Hồ Anh Thái's narrative reveals that mosques function as sacred spatial symbols within the Islamic consciousness.

The most prominent mosques described in the work include the Jameh Mosque, Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, Imam Mosque, the Agha Bozorg Mosque and Madrasa complex, the Nabi Shah Mosque, and Seljuk mosques. These are monumental structures of grand scale: "The mosques, citadels, palaces, museums, together with the natural beauty, attract millions of tourists to Iran each year" (Hồ 2013: 128). Their architecture demonstrates exceptional craftsmanship: "The palaces, shrines, and mosques, with ceramic art embedded into domes and wall decorations, achieved perfection. Miniature painting, refined down to the smallest details, adorns grand compositions. Calligraphy displayed on the walls of mosques and palaces reaches a level where it no longer seems like writing, but resembles exquisite paintings" (Hồ 2013: 289). The atmosphere surrounding the sacred complexes is equally vivid: "The complexes of mosques and mausoleums are ablaze with light twenty-four hours a day. Pilgrims throng day and night, crowding their way into the mosques, gazing up at minarets rising fifty to seventy meters, or inching forward around the tomb of Imam Reza inside the sanctuary" (Hồ 2013: 243).

Mosques always attract visits because they embody sacred spiritual power: "We lingered for quite a while before the mihrab, the holiest spot within a mosque, which helps worshippers determine the direction of Mecca so that they may turn towards it in prayer" (Hồ 2013: 272); "About thirty kilometers from the city lies Jamkaran. The mosque there has a sacred well. People believe that if one writes a petition and casts it into the well, their wishes will come true" (Hồ 2013: 250). The symbol of the mosque often emerges with its golden dome glittering under the sunlight, walls intricately inlaid with ceramic tiles adorned with geometric motifs and flowing Arabic calligraphy. The mosque thus stands as a visual emblem of religious authority and the beauty of faith, while at the same time reflecting the Islamic spirit of venerating beauty as a form of devotion to Allah.

In *Salam! Greetings to Persia*, Islamic attire is also portrayed as a cultural and religious symbol. From women's hijab and abaya to men's traditional robes and turbans, every line and ornamentation expresses the deep connection between aesthetics and religious norms. In the author's perspective, clothing not only shields the body but also "envelops" the spiritual life. All aspects of social conduct – law, language, dress, cuisine – are intrinsically tied to the value system of Islam. In particular, the color black in clothing carries multiple layers of symbolic meaning. In *Salam! Greetings to Persia*, writer Hồ Anh Thái refers to the chador 17 times, 7 of which specifically mention the "black chador." According to the *Dictionary of World Cultural Symbols*, black signifies both the renunciation of worldly vanity and a declaration of faith: "Black has also become the color of rejecting all earthly vanity; hence, the black robe of monks as a proclamation of faith in Christianity and Islam" (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 2002: 293). At the same time, black also connotes irretrievable loss: "Mourning in black signifies permanent loss, a total fall into nothingness" (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 2002: 293). In *Salam! Greetings to Persia*, black attire is emphasized in daily life: "Black clothing is regarded as both luxurious and modest" (Hồ 2013: 123). Black garments also mark the commemoration of martyrdom: "Among the twelve Imams, the memorial for Imam Hossein is the most remarkable. Iranian Muslims mourn Imam Hossein for ten days, culminating on the tenth day, Ashura. In 680, during the month of Moharram (around early December), Imam Hossein and seventy-two followers were besieged for ten days at Karbala, in present-day Iraq, and then massacred on the tenth day. Ashura ceremonies are held across neighborhoods. During these days, even in offices, believers wear black in mourning" (Hồ 2013: 61). Moreover, in everyday contexts, "a woman wears a black chador to demonstrate her virtue" (Hồ 2013: 168). Thus, through the symbolism of clothing, the work highlights a cultural beauty steeped in religious significance. This symbol underscores the fusion of aesthetics, faith, and the communal identity of Iranian Muslims.

Accordingly, the mosque emerges as a sacred space of divine presence, while Islamic attire functions as an outer shell that both protects and defines virtue and religious identity. The material

and visual symbols in *Salam! Greetings to Persia* reflect the spiritual depth of Iranian culture. They are not only everyday images observable in reality but also emblematic signs that reveal the intimate bond between human life and religion.

The material and visual symbols – architecture, clothing, calligraphy, and daily objects—are treated by Hồ Anh Thái not as exotic artifacts but as living embodiments of faith. His aesthetic gaze transforms material culture into a language of spiritual presence. This interpretation reflects a Vietnamese sensibility, where beauty and morality are inseparable, and where the sacred often manifests through the simplicity of everyday forms.

From spiritual to ritual to material-visual dimensions, the Islamic symbolic system in *Salam! Greetings to Persia* does not exist in isolation but rather interweaves, complements, and illuminates one another. Faith in Allah and Muhammad shapes the moral foundation. Rituals of prayer and pilgrimage sustain the rhythm of religious life. Architectural works, garments, and visual colors embody that faith in tangible forms. Hồ Anh Thái not only records these symbols through language but also “translates” them into a cultural framework familiar to Vietnamese readers. The interplay of these symbolic layers creates a vibrant, multidimensional, and evocative portrait of Islam, opening possibilities for intercultural dialogue.

Overall, the system of Islamic symbols in *Salam! Greetings to Persia* is reinterpreted through a distinctly Vietnamese humanist lens. Spiritual, ritual, and material dimensions together reconstruct Islamic identity as a space of cross-cultural empathy and understanding. Hồ Anh Thái does not merely document another civilization; he transforms Islamic symbols into expressions of universal human values – faith, kindness, humility, and aesthetic devotion. In doing so, he opens a new dialogue between Vietnamese and Islamic cultures, suggesting that literature can transcend religious boundaries and speak to the shared moral and emotional foundations of humanity.

### Conclusion

The study demonstrates that *Salam! Greetings to Persia* by Hồ Anh Thái is not only a travelogue rich in personal experience but also a valuable text in introducing, decoding, and interpreting Islamic symbols for Vietnamese readers. Through a subtle, narratively engaging mode of observation, the author guides the reader into the world of Iran – a cultural space of Islam that is both rich and complex, yet rendered familiar and vivid.

The system of Islamic symbols in the work is articulated across three main dimensions: spiritual, ritual, and material. In the spiritual dimension, symbols such as Allah, Muhammad, the Quran, and the Imams shape the community’s intellectual depth and ethical orientation. In the ritual dimension, practices such as prayer, pilgrimage, and the use of water for purification embody the bond between individual and community, sustaining the rhythm of religious life. In the material dimension, mosques, clothing, and colors contribute to a visual sensibility that is at once realistic and sacred, revealing the tangible vitality of religion in everyday life.

By employing symbolic criticism and myth criticism, this study demonstrates how these symbols transcend their literal meanings to become carriers of collective memory and moral consciousness. The symbolic approach highlights how Hồ Anh Thái transforms religious signs into aesthetic and cultural experiences, while the myth-critical lens situates these symbols within the universal structure of human spirituality. This theoretical synthesis reveals that the author does not merely describe Islamic culture; he reinterprets it, reconstructing Islamic identity through a Vietnamese humanistic lens.

Rather than adhering rigidly to descriptive accuracy in portraying Islamic symbols, Hồ Anh Thái adopts a conciliatory approach. Specifically, he represents these symbols through a personal lens that integrates observational knowledge, lived experience, and a literary style imbued with aesthetic resonance. This approach enhances accessibility, enabling Vietnamese readers—who are generally

less familiar with Islam – to engage with and empathize with its cultural and spiritual expressions. Thus, the novel becomes not only a bridge of intercultural understanding but also a demonstration of how literature mediates between faith, culture, and art.

This article has thus far been limited to surveying and analyzing the system of Islamic symbols in Hồ Anh Thái's *Salam! Greetings to Persia*. Future research, however, may be expanded in several directions. First, scholars could compare the representation of Islamic symbols in Hồ Anh Thái's work with depictions of Islam in the prose or travel writing of other Vietnamese authors. Such comparisons would highlight the diversity of cultural interpretations across borders. Second, situating the text in relation to Western discourses on Islam may help illuminate the distinctiveness of a Vietnamese writer's perspective. Third, interdisciplinary approaches – drawing from anthropology, religious studies, or intercultural communication – could provide deeper insights into the relationship between literature, religious symbolism, and community identity.

Overall, this study contributes to expanding symbolic criticism into new cultural terrains, affirming the vitality of Islamic imagery in contemporary Vietnamese literature and its potential to foster cross-cultural empathy and intellectual dialogue.

### Acknowledgement

We sincerely thank our colleagues, friends, family, and affiliated institution for their support during this research. This study received no specific funding from any individual, organization, or research grant.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no personal, financial, or professional relationships that could have influenced—or be perceived to influence—the research, analysis, or conclusions presented in this paper.

### Authors' Contributions Statement

Author Hoàng Thị Thùy Dương and Author Lê Thị Hiền contributed equally as lead authors to the conception, design, data collection, analysis, and writing of the manuscript. Author Hoàng Thị Thùy Dương serves as the corresponding author.

### Ethics Statement

The authors confirm that this research was conducted in accordance with ethical standards and guidelines, ensuring integrity, transparency, and respect for all subjects and sources involved.

### References

- Abuaemar, I. M. 2017. Religious Symbolism in Islamic Art. *Oussour Al Jadida* 7(27): 288–299. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344481611>. [Retrieved: 7th April 2025]
- Chevalier, J., & Gheerbrant, A. 1992. *Dictionnaire des Symboles*. Phạm Vĩnh Cư (Trans.). 2002. *Dictionary of World Cultural Symbols: Myths, Dreams, Customs, Gestures, Forms, Images, Colors, Numbers*. Da Nang: Da Nang Publishing House.
- Chosinawarotin. 2024. Islamic Art and Architecture: A Systematic Review of Aesthetics, Symbolism, and Cultural Significance. *Islamic Studies Journal (ISLAM)* 1(2): 46–53.
- Eliade, M. 1948. *Traité d'Histoire des Religions*. Đoàn V.C. & Đỗ L.T. (Trans.). 2018. *The origins of religions*. Hà Nội: Social Sciences Publishing House.

- Eliade, M. 1965. *Le Sacré et Le Profane*. Đỗ L.T. (Intro.), Huyền Giang (Trans.). The Sacred and the profane. *World Literature* 2: 198–222.
- Ferdinal, F., Oktavianus, O., & Zahid, I. (2023). Exploring the Beauty of Islamic Values Through Metaphorical Expressions in Literary Work. *Afkar: Jurnal Akidah Dan Pemikiran Islam*, 25(2), 421–458. <https://doi.org/10.22452/afkar.vol25no2.13>.
- Ghaffar, A. A., & Sahib, M. A. 2025. Sanctifying Symbolism in Islamic Practice and Its Impact on Faith. *Journal of Integrated Sciences* 5(1): 100–121.
- Hồ, A. T. 2013. *Salam! Greetings to Persia*. Hanoi: Tre Publishing House.
- Jezzini, M. A. 2023. Quranic Symbol and Its Impact on Abbasy's Poetry. *Alustath Journal for Human and Social Sciences* 62(1): 45–59. <https://alustath.uobaghdad.edu.iq/journal/vol62/iss1/3>. [Retrieved: 6th August 2025]
- Lê, T. H. 2021. Intertextuality in Hồ Anh Thái's Novels. *UED Journal of Social Sciences, Humanities & Education* 11(5): 172–178. <https://doi.org/10.47393/jshe.v11i.956>.
- Meletinsky, E. M. 1969. *Poetics of Myth*. Trần N.T. & Song Mộc (Trans.). 2004. *Poetics of myth*. Hanoi: Vietnam National Universty Press.
- Monneyron, F., & Thomas, J. 2002. *Mythes et Littérature*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Muslihed-Dien, N., & Hameed, F. S. 2019. The Power of Symbolism in the Holy Quran: A literary analysis. *Opción* 35(Special Issue 19): 2899–2921.
- Nguyễn, T. B. T. 2016. *Hồ Anh Thái's Prose from an Intercultural Perspective* [Master's Thesis, Hue University – University of Education].
- Nguyễn, V. H. 2023. The Issue of Integration of Contemporary Vietnamese Literature from the Perspective of Hồ Anh Thái's Phenomenon. *Journal of Literature, Art and Criticism Online*. <https://lyluanphebinh.vn/tin-tuc/nghien-cuu-trao-doi/1396/van-de-hoi-nhap-cua-van-hoc-duong-dai-viet-nam-nhin-tu-hien-tuong-ho-anh-thai>. [Retrieved: 8th July 2025]
- Trần, Q. H. 2018. *The Postmodern Elements in the Works of Hồ Anh Thái and Haruki Murakami* [Doctoral Dissertation, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Graduate Academy of Social Sciences].