

# The Evolution of the Arba‘in Tradition in Arabic, Persian and Turkic Literature

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**Abstract:** This article explores the evolution of the Arba‘in tradition in Arabic, Persian, and Turkic literary contexts, focusing on its transformation from a religious compilation into a distinct literary genre. The study examines how the tradition of collecting and interpreting forty hadiths originated within early Islamic scholarship and later expanded across different cultural and linguistic environments. Special attention is given to the role of Arabic hadith literature in shaping the initial form of the Arba‘in, as well as its subsequent development in Persian and Turkic literatures, where it acquired poetic structure and artistic expression. The works of prominent figures such as Imam al-Nawawi, Abd al-Rahman Jami, and Alisher Navoi are analyzed as key milestones in this process. The article argues that the evolution of the Arba‘in tradition reflects broader processes of cultural transmission, adaptation, and integration within Islamic civilization. It highlights the genre’s role as a bridge between religious knowledge and literary creativity across different historical periods.

**Keywords:** Arba‘in tradition, forty hadiths, Islamic literature, Arabic literature, Persian literature, Turkic literature, literary evolution, hadith studies, classical Eastern literature, religious and poetic genres

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**Introduction:** The interaction between religion and literature has historically served as a powerful driving force in the formation of new literary genres across different civilizations. Within the Islamic world, this interaction reached a particularly high level of integration, where religious knowledge not only shaped intellectual discourse but also stimulated the development of diverse literary forms. One of the most notable manifestations of this synthesis is the Arba‘in tradition, which involves the collection and interpretation of forty hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad. Over time, this tradition evolved into a distinct literary genre, reflecting the dynamic relationship between sacred texts and artistic expression.

The origins of the Arba‘in tradition can be traced back to the early centuries of Islam, when the preservation and transmission of hadith became a central concern for Muslim scholars. In this context, the compilation of selected hadiths into concise collections served both pedagogical and devotional purposes. Among the most

influential works is *Al-Arbaʿin al-Nawawiyya* by Imam al-Nawawi, which systematized forty essential hadiths and established a canonical model for later compilations. The popularity of such collections was further reinforced by a widely circulated prophetic tradition encouraging the memorization and dissemination of forty hadiths, which contributed to the institutionalization of the *Arbaʿin* in practice within Islamic scholarship.

While the *Arbaʿin* tradition initially developed within Arabic intellectual and theological contexts, its evolution across Persian and Turkic literary traditions represents a significant transformation in both form and function. In Arabic literature, *Arbaʿin* texts were predominantly scholarly and didactic, focusing on theological clarity and the preservation of authentic religious teachings. However, as Islam spread to non-Arab regions, particularly in Persia and Central Asia, the need to communicate religious knowledge in local languages and culturally relevant forms became increasingly important. This shift led to the adaptation of the *Arbaʿin* tradition into poetic and literary formats.

A major turning point in this transformation can be observed in the works of Abd al-Rahman Jami, whose *Chihil Hadith* represents one of the earliest and most influential poetic interpretations of the *Arbaʿin* tradition in Persian literature. Jami's work not only preserved the religious essence of the hadiths but also enriched them with aesthetic and artistic qualities, making them more accessible and memorable for a broader audience. This literary approach was further developed in Turkic literature, particularly in the works of Alisher Navoi, whose *Arbaʿin* exemplifies the successful integration of religious content with poetic expression in the Turkic linguistic and cultural context.

The evolution of the *Arbaʿin* tradition across these three major literary spheres—Arabic, Persian, and Turkic—demonstrates a broader process of cultural transmission and adaptation within Islamic civilization. It reflects how a religious practice rooted in hadith scholarship was gradually transformed into a versatile literary genre capable of addressing diverse audiences and fulfilling multiple functions, including moral instruction, spiritual guidance, and artistic expression.

Despite the existence of numerous studies on hadith literature and classical Eastern poetics, the *Arbaʿin* tradition has often been examined in a fragmented manner, either as a theological phenomenon or as a literary form. There remains a need for a comprehensive analysis that considers its evolution across different linguistic and cultural contexts. In this regard, the present study aims to investigate the historical development of the *Arbaʿin* tradition in Arabic, Persian, and Turkic literatures, with particular attention to the factors that influenced its transformation from a religious compilation into a distinct literary genre. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach, this research seeks to highlight the *Arbaʿin* tradition as a unique example of the interaction between religion and literature, demonstrating its enduring significance within the intellectual and cultural heritage of the Islamic world.

**Literature Review and Methodology:** The *Arbaʿin* tradition has been examined in various scholarly fields, including Islamic studies, literary history, and comparative philology. Early studies were primarily focused on hadith scholarship, where the compilation and classification of prophetic traditions were considered central intellectual activities. In this context, the work *Al-Arbaʿin al-Nawawiyya* by Imam al-Nawawi occupies a fundamental place, as it established a structured model for selecting and interpreting forty hadiths. Classical Islamic scholars viewed such compilations mainly as religious and didactic texts aimed at preserving essential teachings of Islam.

Subsequent developments of the *Arbaʿin* tradition are closely associated with Persian literary culture. Abd al-Rahman Jami, in his *Chihil Hadith*, played a crucial role in transforming the *Arbaʿin* from a purely theological compilation into a poetic and artistic genre. His work demonstrated how religious content could be expressed through refined literary forms while maintaining its ethical and spiritual essence. This tradition was further developed in Turkic literature, particularly by Alisher Navoi, whose *Arbaʿin* reflects a synthesis of Islamic teachings and classical Turkic poetics.

In modern scholarship, the *Arbaʿin* genre has been approached from broader historical and cultural perspectives. Carl Brockelmann in his *History of Arabic Literature* provided an overview of Arabic literary traditions, including religious texts related to hadith. Yevgeny Bertels explored the role of Islamic sources in shaping Persian and Central Asian literary traditions. In Uzbek scholarship, H. Karamatov, in *Qurʻon va oʻzbek adabiyoti*, emphasized the influence of Qurʻanic and hadith-based themes on the development of national

literature. Furthermore, F. Kamolov analyzed the tradition of “Chihil Hadith” writing in Persian-Tajik literature, highlighting its historical roots and literary evolution.

Despite these contributions, many studies remain limited either to theological analysis or to literary interpretation. There is still a lack of comprehensive research that integrates the Arabic origins of the Arba‘in with its later development in Persian and Turkic literary contexts. Therefore, this study seeks to provide a more holistic understanding of the evolution of the Arba‘in tradition by combining historical, literary, and socio-cultural perspectives.

The methodological framework of this research is based on an interdisciplinary approach. The historical method is employed to trace the origins and development of the Arba‘in tradition within the broader context of Islamic civilization. The comparative method is used to analyze the similarities and differences in the genre’s evolution across Arabic, Persian, and Turkic literatures.

In addition, textual analysis is applied to key works by al-Nawawi, Jami, and Navoi in order to examine their thematic structure, stylistic features, and interpretative strategies. This allows for an understanding of how hadiths are transformed into literary texts and adapted to different cultural contexts.

The study also utilizes a socio-cultural approach, focusing on the role of religion, education, and cultural interaction in shaping the Arba‘in tradition. This approach helps to explain why the genre became particularly prominent in non-Arab regions, where the need for accessible interpretations of Islamic teachings was especially strong.

Furthermore, elements of hermeneutic analysis are employed to interpret the deeper meanings of hadith-based texts and their literary representations. This enables a more nuanced understanding of the Arba‘in genre as both a religious and artistic phenomenon. By integrating these methodological approaches and scholarly perspectives, the research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of the Arba‘in tradition across different linguistic and cultural environments.

**Materials and Methods:** The present study is based on a comprehensive corpus of primary and secondary sources that reflect the development of the Arba‘in tradition within Arabic, Persian, and Turkic literary environments. The primary materials consist of classical Arba‘in texts and authoritative hadith compilations, which serve as the core empirical basis for the analysis. Among these, particular emphasis is placed on *Al-Arba‘in al-Nawawiyya* by Imam al-Nawawi, which represents the canonical form of the genre in Arabic scholarly tradition. This work is significant for its systematic selection of hadiths and its didactic clarity, which later influenced both religious and literary adaptations.

In addition, the study incorporates *Chihil Hadith* by Abd al-Rahman Jami, which marks a turning point in the transformation of the Arba‘in tradition into a poetic and aesthetic form within Persian literature. Jami’s work is particularly valuable for analyzing how religious content is reinterpreted through literary devices, including metaphor, rhythm, and poetic structure. Furthermore, *Arba‘in* by Alisher Navoi is examined as a representative example of the genre’s development in Turkic literature, demonstrating the adaptation of Islamic teachings into a new linguistic and cultural context.

The selection of these texts is based on their historical significance, representativeness, and influence on subsequent literary traditions. Together, they provide a diachronic perspective that allows for tracing the evolution of the Arba‘in genre across different regions and time periods.

The secondary materials include a wide range of scholarly works in the fields of Islamic studies, literary theory, and cultural history. Among them are *History of Arabic Literature* by Carl Brockelmann, which offers a foundational overview of Arabic literary development, and studies by Yevgeny Bertels that explore the interaction between Islamic sources and Persian-Tajik literary traditions. In addition, regional scholarship is incorporated through works such as *Qur‘on va o‘zbek adabiyoti* by H. Karamatov, which highlights the integration of Qur‘anic and hadith-based themes into Uzbek literature, and research by F. Kamolov on the tradition of writing “Chihil Hadith” in Persian-Tajik literary history.

Methodologically, this research adopts an interdisciplinary approach that integrates methods from literary studies, Islamic studies, and comparative cultural analysis. The historical method is employed to reconstruct the genesis and development of the Arba‘in tradition within the broader framework of Islamic civilization. This

includes examining the early stages of hadith compilation, the institutionalization of religious knowledge, and the subsequent transformation of these materials into literary forms.

The comparative method plays a central role in the study, enabling the identification of both continuities and divergences in the development of the Arba'in genre across Arabic, Persian, and Turkic literatures. Through this approach, the research analyzes how a common religious foundation gave rise to diverse literary expressions shaped by different linguistic and cultural contexts.

Textual analysis is applied to selected primary texts in order to examine their internal structure, thematic organization, and stylistic features. This includes the analysis of narrative strategies, poetic devices, and modes of interpretation used to convey hadith content. Particular attention is paid to the transformation of religious discourse into literary language, as well as to the balance between doctrinal accuracy and artistic expression.

In addition, the study employs a socio-cultural approach to investigate the external factors that influenced the emergence and dissemination of the Arba'in tradition. These factors include the expansion of Islam into non-Arab regions, the need for religious education among diverse populations, and the role of literature as a medium for cultural and ideological transmission. This approach helps to explain why the Arba'in genre became especially prominent in Persian and Turkic literary traditions.

Furthermore, elements of hermeneutic analysis are utilized to interpret the meanings of hadith-based texts within their specific historical and cultural contexts. This method allows for a deeper understanding of how religious texts are reinterpreted and adapted in different literary frameworks, as well as how they function as carriers of ethical and spiritual values. The combination of these materials and methods ensures a holistic and systematic analysis of the Arba'in tradition. It enables the study to address both the internal literary characteristics of the genre and the external historical and socio-religious conditions that shaped its evolution. As a result, the research provides a well-grounded and multidimensional understanding of the Arba'in genre as a unique phenomenon at the intersection of religion, literature, and culture.

**Results and Discussion:** The results of this study reveal that the evolution of the Arba'in tradition across Arabic, Persian, and Turkic literary contexts represents a complex and multi-layered process shaped by religious, cultural, linguistic, and intellectual factors. The analysis demonstrates that the Arba'in genre did not emerge as a fully formed literary structure but gradually evolved from a religious practice rooted in hadith scholarship into a distinct literary phenomenon.

One of the primary findings of the research is that the earliest stage of the Arba'in tradition was closely associated with the development of hadith sciences in the Islamic world. During the formative period of Islamic scholarship, the collection, classification, and authentication of hadiths became a central intellectual activity. In this context, the compilation of forty hadiths served as a pedagogical tool aimed at summarizing essential aspects of Islamic teachings. The work of Imam al-Nawawi, *Al-Arba'in al-Nawawiyya*, played a decisive role in standardizing this practice and establishing a widely accepted model that combined brevity, thematic coherence, and doctrinal clarity. This model became the foundation for subsequent developments of the genre.

Another important result is the recognition of the symbolic and spiritual significance of the number forty in Islamic thought. The widespread belief that memorizing and transmitting forty hadiths carries religious merit significantly contributed to the popularity and continuity of the Arba'in tradition. This symbolic dimension not only legitimized the practice but also encouraged scholars and poets to engage in the creation of Arba'in collections, thereby facilitating its diffusion across different regions of the Islamic world.

The study further demonstrates that the transformation of the Arba'in tradition into a literary genre occurred primarily outside the Arabic cultural sphere, particularly within Persian and Turkic literary traditions. In Arabic literature, Arba'in texts largely remained within the framework of religious scholarship and didactic prose. However, in Persian literature, the genre underwent a significant aesthetic transformation. The work of Abd al-Rahman Jami, *Chihil Hadith*, represents a crucial stage in this process, as it introduced poetic form and artistic expression into the interpretation of hadiths. Jami's approach allowed for the integration of ethical teachings with literary aesthetics, making the texts more engaging and accessible.

This transformation reached a new level in Turkic literature, particularly in the works of Alisher Navoi. His Arba'in not only followed the established tradition but also adapted it to the linguistic, cultural, and literary

norms of Turkic-speaking audiences. Navoi's contribution demonstrates how the Arba'in genre became a medium for the localization of Islamic knowledge, enabling the transmission of religious values within a specific cultural framework. This adaptation process highlights the dynamic nature of the genre and its ability to respond to the needs of different communities.

The comparative analysis of Arabic, Persian, and Turkic traditions reveals both continuity and transformation. On the one hand, all versions of the Arba'in share a common foundation in hadith literature and Islamic ethical teachings. On the other hand, the form, style, and function of the genre vary significantly depending on the cultural and linguistic context. In Arabic tradition, the emphasis is placed on authenticity and scholarly precision; in Persian literature, on poetic expression and aesthetic refinement; and in Turkic literature, on accessibility and cultural adaptation.

The discussion also highlights the role of socio-cultural factors in shaping the evolution of the Arba'in genre. The expansion of Islam into non-Arab regions created a demand for the translation and interpretation of religious knowledge into local languages. This need was particularly strong in Persian and Turkic societies, where literature served as an important tool for education and cultural transmission. As a result, the Arba'in genre became an effective means of communicating religious values, ethical norms, and spiritual concepts to a broader audience.

Furthermore, the study identifies the interplay between religious authority and literary creativity as a defining characteristic of the Arba'in genre. While the content of the hadiths remained fixed and sacred, their interpretation allowed for a certain degree of creative freedom. This balance between doctrinal fidelity and artistic expression enabled the genre to develop both as a religious and a literary form. It also explains why the Arba'in tradition could be sustained and diversified across different historical periods and cultural contexts.

In comparison with previous research, which often treated the Arba'in either as a component of hadith studies or as a marginal literary phenomenon, this study provides a more integrated perspective. It demonstrates that the evolution of the Arba'in tradition should be understood as part of a broader process of cultural interaction and intellectual exchange within Islamic civilization.

Overall, the findings confirm that the Arba'in genre represents a unique synthesis of religious knowledge and literary creativity. Its development across Arabic, Persian, and Turkic literatures illustrates the adaptability of Islamic intellectual traditions and their capacity to generate diverse forms of cultural expression. This multidimensional character ensures the continued relevance of the Arba'in genre as both a subject of scholarly inquiry and a significant component of the classical Eastern literary heritage.

**Conclusion:** This study has provided a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of the Arba'in tradition across Arabic, Persian, and Turkic literary contexts, demonstrating that the genre represents a unique intersection of religious knowledge, literary creativity, and socio-cultural transformation within Islamic civilization. The findings confirm that the Arba'in tradition did not emerge as a purely literary phenomenon, but rather originated within the framework of hadith scholarship as a pedagogical and devotional practice aimed at preserving and transmitting essential elements of Islamic teaching.

The research has shown that the early development of the Arba'in tradition was closely linked to the institutionalization of hadith sciences, where scholars such as Imam al-Nawawi played a central role in systematizing the selection and interpretation of forty hadiths. At this stage, the genre functioned primarily as a didactic and theological tool, characterized by its emphasis on clarity, authenticity, and accessibility. The symbolic significance of the number forty further reinforced the legitimacy and popularity of this practice, embedding it deeply within Islamic intellectual and spiritual culture.

A key conclusion of this study is that the transformation of the Arba'in tradition into a literary genre occurred through processes of cultural transmission and adaptation, particularly in non-Arab regions. In Persian literary tradition, the genre underwent a significant aesthetic shift, as exemplified by the works of Abd al-Rahman Jami, who introduced poetic form and artistic expression into the interpretation of hadiths. This transformation not only enhanced the literary value of the genre but also expanded its communicative potential.

The development of the Arba'in genre reached a new level in Turkic literature, where it became a powerful medium for the localization of Islamic knowledge. The works of Alisher Navoi illustrate how religious

teachings were integrated into the linguistic and cultural framework of Turkic-speaking societies. This adaptation reflects the broader dynamics of Islamic civilization, in which universal religious principles were reinterpreted through diverse cultural and literary forms.

The comparative analysis conducted in this study highlights both the continuity and diversity of the Arba'in tradition. While the genre maintains a consistent foundation in hadith literature and Islamic ethical values, its form, function, and stylistic features vary significantly across different literary traditions. This variability underscores the flexibility of the genre and its capacity to respond to changing social, cultural, and intellectual conditions. Furthermore, the study emphasizes that the evolution of the Arba'in genre was driven by a combination of factors, including religious devotion, educational needs, cultural interaction, and literary innovation. The genre served not only as a means of transmitting religious knowledge but also as a tool for moral education, spiritual reflection, and cultural integration. In this sense, the Arba'in tradition can be understood as a dynamic and multifunctional phenomenon that reflects the broader processes of knowledge production and dissemination in the Islamic world.

Importantly, this research contributes to the existing scholarship by offering an integrated perspective that bridges the gap between theological and literary approaches. It demonstrates that the Arba'in genre should be studied not in isolation, but as part of a wider cultural and intellectual system in which religion and literature are deeply interconnected.

**In conclusion**, the Arba'in tradition represents a significant and enduring component of Islamic literary heritage. Its ability to combine doctrinal precision with artistic expression has ensured its relevance across centuries and cultures. As both a religious and literary phenomenon, the Arba'in genre continues to offer valuable insights into the ways in which sacred knowledge is interpreted, adapted, and transmitted within diverse cultural contexts. Future research may further explore its comparative dimensions, manuscript traditions, and contemporary reinterpretations, thereby deepening our understanding of its role in the global history of literature.

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