



COVER ILLUSTRATION: SUE WICKINSON, COLLAGE: SARAH ANJUM BARI

FEATURE

'Plants of the Qur'an explores flora dating back 1400 years

JOHN DREW

The first mosque or masjid in Britain was built as long ago as 1761, some 30 years after George Sale's ground-breaking translation of the *Qur'an*. That it was built in Kew Gardens gives the game away. It was designed not as a place of worship but as one of a series of orientalist buildings gracing an extensive royal park.

So what shall we say about an exhibition just opened at Kew Gardens to celebrate the launch of an illustrated book, *Plants of the Qur'an* (Kew Publishing, 2023)? Does it seem strange that a sacred book is being studied for what it can tell us about plant life 1400—and more—years ago?

Dr Shahina Ghazanfar, the author of a series of books on the flora of the Middle East who compiled this compendium, explains: "This is not a religious book but about history and culture. It promotes the pleasure of research and learning, I hope as much for my readers as for myself".

Dr Ghazanfar's researches, part of a long tradition that has sought to elucidate the significance of certain plants named within sacred texts, have been illustrated by Sue Wickinson, whose watercolour illustrations feature in the special exhibition.

Both botanists have not only scoured Kew but have traversed the deserts of the Middle East as part of their archaeobotanical research. It has not always been easy to identify which particular plants are those referred to in the sacred texts but they have been able to correct many previous erroneous identifications.

There are some 20 plants mentioned in the *Qur'an* itself, of which 12 are food plants. A further 54 plants are referred to in the Hadith of diverse Islamic scholars. Most but not all are indigenous to the Middle East or South West Asia. Some will be better known in Bangladesh than others.

Many of the plants covered in *Plants of the Qur'an* have been recommended by Prophet Mohammed (Peace be upon Him) and/or his scholarly disciples as part of their concern for a healthy diet and medicinal remedies.

Increasingly these days, such advice is seen as particularly valuable in terms of sustaining the planet.

Of those plants associated with The Prophet himself, one favourite must be the Lote-tree, which (according to most authorities) he encountered during his ascension into the heavens where, we are told, he enjoyed visions beyond our comprehension.

When you are in the bazaar or kitchen, do you know how many of the vegetables and fruits, herbs and spices you see and use, have an ancient lineage, some much, much older than Islam itself? Cooking lentils as a domesticated plant, for example, has been going on for more than 10,000 years, according to the seeds found in archaeological digs.

Lentils were one of the tastier foods the Israelites asked Moses for when they left Egypt, along with green herbs, cucumbers, or snake melons (exact identification can be difficult), garlic and onions. That makes up a familiar enough meal for most of us, especially when you add in the wheat for chapattis that has been cultivated for almost as long as the lentils.

While many of these foods are reputed to have a variety of medicinal effects, they are frequently said to have value for the soul as well as the body. Among herbs, basil (*tulsi*) is as sacred as it is nutritious, used in the religious text of the Hadith as a metaphor for happiness in bringing us closer to God.

The same is true of ginger that originated in Southeast Asia. In the *Qur'an* it is said that it will be mixed in a drink offered as a reward for the righteous as they enjoy heavenly gardens shaded by fruit trees.

As for fruits, one particular species of fig native not to the subcontinent but to the Mediterranean region, *ficus carica* or anjir, is said to have been a gift of God from Paradise. Practically speaking, it is good for haemorrhoids.

We are all familiar with henna (*mehndi*) put on by brides, but it can also be used as a cooling paste for fevers, sunstroke, ulcers, and nose bleeds. Henna has a cosmopolitan provenance, much used by everybody from the ancient

Egyptians and Romans to the Moroccan Jews.

The grape originates in the Caucasus. Residues in jars show there was wine-making 10,000 years ago in Georgia, a winery in Armenia 6,000 years ago. Even in its non-alcoholic form, it is recommended as a refreshment and still has its uses when soured to vinegar. In Paradise there are said to be two gardens of grape vines surrounded by palm trees and cultivated fields.

While we don't see all the fruits of the sacred texts ourselves, some are ingrained in our imagination, none more so than the pomegranate. This fruit, also said to have come to us from Paradise, has become a symbol of it. The Spanish city of Granada, home to the Alhambra, a replica of part of which graced Kew Gardens at the same time as the Mosque, takes its name from it.

Botanic Gardens such as those at Kew are thought to have originated in China and at Kew there is still a tall 18th century pagoda, often restored, decorated with dragons. It would be inappropriate nowadays to re-erect the long-gone Mosque—London is full of them now as properly respected places of worship and my hometown of Cambridge has a wonderful new Eco-Mosque.

My eye is finally caught by a painting of that useful plant, the toothbrush tree: *kampt* (*pilu*). I had supposed this might be the same as the equally useful neem, but it seems it is not. Looking at Sue Wickinson's engaging drawings, I am ashamed of the number of plants I could not identify in their original growing condition. Shame to say, I didn't even recognize the fields of turmeric in Bengal for what they were when first I saw them.

Plants of the Qur'an has an epigraph taken from Ibn Khaldun's *Al Muqaddimah*: "Man is essentially ignorant and becomes learned through acquiring knowledge". This compendium of intriguing botanic lore is published by Kew at £25.

John Drew is an occasional contributor to The Daily Star. A collection of his articles is due to be published later this year by ULAB Press.

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FICTION REVIEW

Single wife, double life

'Just Between Us' by Adele Parks (HQ, 2023)

FARAH GHUZNAVI

I usually enjoy Adele Parks' writing, so I am always happy to hear that she has a new book out. But hearing that her newest story would be following the same set of characters as an earlier novel of hers was somewhat unexpected.

After I realised which characters were being referred to, I was delighted at the prospect of reading this new book, *Just Between Us*, since it turned out to be a sequel to a very interesting story of hers that I had read just a few months ago, titled *Woman Last Seen*.

Woman Last Seen is a suspenseful, and at times uncomfortable, read. Based on a very unusual concept, the book finished with an open-ended conclusion, which had left me both intrigued and a little dissatisfied.

The second part of this duology is set firmly in the COVID-19 period, and successfully conveys the sense of confusion and claustrophobia that people across the globe were experiencing at that time. The story picks up on two cases of women who had disappeared in London prior to the onset of the pandemic.

At first glance, the two missing women would appear to have little in common. Kai, after all, was the glamorous trophy wife of a young Dutch millionaire, and Leigh was the devoted wife and mother of a middle-class household, where she lived with Mark and his two children, her young stepsons.

But as the canny police officer in charge, DC Clements, soon finds out, the two women have just about everything in common. Because they are the same person! Kylie (Kai, Leigh) Gillingham has been living a double life, simultaneously juggling very different lifestyles and relationships.

While the premise of the first novel seems bizarre, it was convincingly written. Not to mention that the idea of bigamy is far from new. Similar cases have even been identified in Bangladesh.

So it is not the core concept of the story that is particularly sensational. What is unusual here is the fact that the bigamist is a woman, and that she has managed to pull off such a complicated web of lies so successfully.

When DC Clements misses, by just a few hours, the opportunity to recover the abducted Kylie—who was being held prisoner by an unknown captor in the initial period after she disappeared—the police officer becomes obsessed with finding out what actually happened to the missing woman.

Meanwhile, as the lockdown begins and Kylie's family(ies) are struggling to come to terms with what they have found out about someone that they thought they knew well, a parallel story is unfolding. Stacie Jones and her devoted father are trying to deal with her harrowing diagnosis and its after-effects. But is Stacie's father caring, or controlling? The real question, of course, is not whether the two narratives are linked, but how. Spoiler: the full story here may not be quite what you think it is.

While the plot of *Just Between Us* is perhaps slightly less shocking than *Woman Last Seen*, the storytelling is equally effective. I found the story gripping and the book hard to put down. For anyone looking for an interesting, absorbing, suspenseful read, I would suggest both books in this set, but if you don't read *Woman Last Seen*, it's still worth reading *Just Between Us* as a stand-alone story. The second novel successfully builds on the narrative of the first, but the two books each offer a different set of thrills, and I recommend both.

Farah Ghuznavi is a writer, translator and development worker. Her work has been published in 11 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe and the USA. Writer in Residence with Commonwealth Writers, she published a short story collection titled *Fragments of Riversong* (Daily Star Books, 2013), and edited the *Lifelines* anthology (Zubaan Books, 2012). She is currently working on her new short story collection and is on Instagram @farahghuznavi.



POETRY REVIEW

Shamim Reza creates new frontiers with his new poetry collection

'Selected Poems' by Shamim Reza (ULAB Press, 2022)

SARAZEEN SAIF AHANA

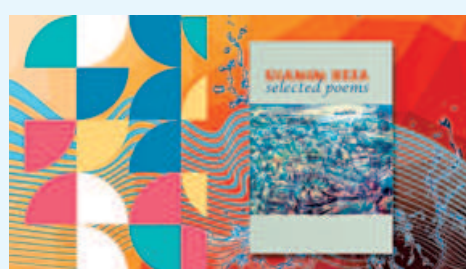
We live in a world of incredible noise. Here in Dhaka, especially, our days and nights are blanketed in layers of noise that pierce through solitude, contemplation, and peace. To find silence here is bliss, a breath of air for those of us who are drowning in the newness of the world. Such silence is what I discovered in *Selected Poems* by Shamim Reza, translated from the Bangla by Dulal Al Monsur and Mahub Siddiquee.

Dr. Shamim Reza is a poet, and the founding director and professor of the Bangabandhu Institute of Comparative Literature and Culture, Jahangirnagar University. Over the last 30 years, he has received multiple national and international literary awards for his work. He is, currently, the vice-president of PEN International,

Bangladesh chapter.

The cover artwork in his new book features SM Sultan's *Crossing* (1953), and the book cover is where this journey begins. A river, chaotic and wild, is flooded by an entire population desperate to cross over. There is not an inch of this artwork that does not contain some form of restlessness—except the sky. Calm, serene, and benevolent, the sky cares little for the human condition. It simply observes, safe in its enormity. This image felt indicative of what Professor Reza's book contains—the ability to make us sit back, in a world where "the hustle" is all that matters, and breathe through verse.

Poetry is one of those few surviving instances of art which demands time, which commands you to cast off the clutter and haze of modern life and just reflect. When



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

Professor Reza writes, in Part 3, "Night and the Himalayas", of "Observances"—

Night, can your earth-scientists tell How much earth and stones it takes for a Himalaya to be formed? —it truly feels like the cool breeze gentling this unquiet city. For a single, dazzling moment, you are transported far from the

pressure, demand, noise and cacophony of modernity, and returned to the coolness of earth, the soft light of starlight and the magic of seeing the enormity of the Himalayas rise before you. No longer does the weight of the world rest on your shoulders. You are faced with the power and authority of nature, and you are made comfortingly insignificant, like a small child made safe in her mother's embrace.

In his Preface to the book, John Fardon writes, "Nature is embedded in [Professor Reza's] poetry, but it is not merely descriptive, but creates a mysterious, romantic, almost magical connection." These words ring perfectly and beautifully true, as Professor Reza takes the reader in what feels like an odyssey of sensation. From the rivers and fields that make up this land, to Lalon and

his music haunting the shadows of trees, love won and lost, the divine and infinite variety of pain and victory, from identity and desire, from the love of mothers to the love of nature, there is little that is said and a lot that is felt in this single volume.

There are too many verses of wonder in this book of poetry to be quoted, far too much beauty to fall in love with in a single day. Meaning abounds, but emotions reign here, and there is space to love and live and breathe. Poetry is never about meanings. Poetry is about feelings, and how a poem makes one feel is the measure of that poem's worth. If that is true, then this is a literary dragon's hoard, and it is beyond priceless.

Sarazeen Saif Ahana is an adjunct faculty member at Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), where she teaches English and dreams in verse.