

# Reviews

## JUNGLEE girl

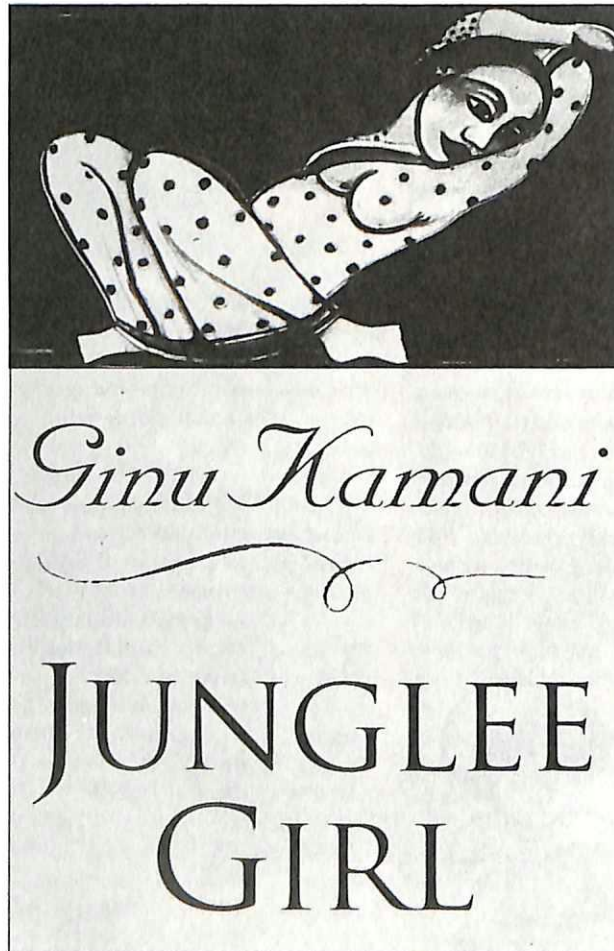
GINU KAMANI IN HER DEBUT, SAYS REVIEWER CHAT GARCIA RAMILO, HAS ASSEMBLED AN UNCONVENTIONAL, AMUSING, EARTHY AND IMPASSIONED CAST OF WOMEN AND GIRLS INTERACTING ACROSS CASTES AND GENERATIONS.

Junglee girl is a Gujarati term that describes a wild and uncontrollable woman. It is the title of Ginu Kamani's first book which weaves together 11 short stories that unveil the erotic nature of Indian women.

Well known feminist writer Alice Walker calls Ginu Kamani, "a new subversive voice; engaging and fresh." I couldn't agree more. In her first collection, Kamani regales her readers with often hilarious and at times intense stories of how Indian women and girls rebel against the rigidly ridiculous code that ruled their sexual behavior.

The first story, "Ciphers," sets the tone and the subject matter of the book. In this tale, a Gujarati woman traveling to her home town from overseas comes to terms with her identity. She sends this telepathic message to an older Gujarati woman who is enraged at her short hair and knee-length dress: "It doesn't matter anymore what identity I was born into... What matters is that I am sexual."

In the book, Kamani narrates many coming-of-sexual-age stories that chronicle the adventures of be-



coming erotic amid the complexities of age, caste, gender and generation in Indian culture and society. French

feminist critic Helene Cixous who asserts that "women have almost everything to write about their sexu-

ality," describes such adventures as "voyages, crossings, advances, sudden and slow awakenings, discoveries of a formerly timid region that is now springing up."

This is most vividly illustrated in "The Cure," a story about a pubescent girl who grows into a "giant" towering over "all men, her elders, the gods and all." Fearing a lifetime of suffering lest she gets stuck with an unmarried daughter, the girl's mother desperately seeks a "cure" for her daughter's "deformity" by hiring a male sexologist, who turns out to be a lecher. One look at the protagonist's body prompts the doctor to diagnose a grave imbalance in the girl's "feminine fluids." Under the guise of performing a comprehensive evaluation, he prescribes the "taking of regular fluids from the patient." The treatment, designed by the doctor to take advantage of the innocent girl and add her to his many long-term patients, backfires as the patient learns to collect her own fluids and discovers the power that comes from touching her own body.

The unexpected unfolding of events in "The Cure," as in the rest of the stories in the book, makes Kamani's storytelling intriguing. In one story, a girl experiences a sensual thrill as her toes encounter a hairy mound underneath the skirt of Shakuntala, her mother's servant. The girl believes that the furry body licking her toes is a tortoise. Kamani's description, on the other hand, suggests that the long warm strokes are being made by something other than an animal. She keeps her readers guessing up to the end when she surprises her readers by revealing what lives between Shakuntala's legs.

Three other stories in this collection, "Lucky Dip," "Maria" and "The Smell," explore the sexual awakening of adolescent girls.

## KAMANI DEFIES THE PATRIARCHAL LITERARY CANON, WHERE SEXUAL INITIATION IS A MALE DOMAIN AS SHE BRINGS TO LIFE THREE GIRLS INTENT ON SATISFYING AND UNDERSTANDING THE CONFUSING SEXUAL STIRRINGS OF THEIR YOUNG BODIES. THERE IS NO SHAMEFULNESS NOR MODESTY AS THE GIRLS LUST NOT FOR BOYS, BUT FOR OTHER GIRLS.

Kamani defies the patriarchal literary canon, where sexual initiation is a male domain as she brings to life three girls intent on satisfying and understanding the confusing sexual stirrings of their young bodies. There is no shamefulness nor modesty as the girls lust not for boys, but for other girls.

I find Kamani's bold and atypical representations of her female characters the most engaging quality of her book. She has assembled an unconventional, amusing, earthy and impassioned cast of women and girls interacting across castes and generations.

The funniest piece in *Jungle Girl*, "Waxing The Thing," is a wacky tale about a village girl who

waxes "rich-rich ladies things" for a living. In this satire, Kamani, through her main character, pokes fun at Indian middle and upper class women's obsession with pulling out every single hair from their bodies, believing that this will make them more desirable to their husbands.

Even characters who are seemingly boxed into traditional roles redefine their sexuality within the confined spaces they find themselves in. In "Younger Wife," Kamani gives voice to a disturbingly content woman who was once her father's "younger wife," and who finds happiness in dutifully serving her husband as a proper wife and the mother of his sons. The irony of her position is expressed in her own words, "I have everything now, more than any woman I know. But my happiness is secret. No woman would believe me, and none could imagine herself in my place."

In "Tears of Kamala," the most poignant character among Kamani's heroines emerges as a woman cursed by her husband because her "parched belly neither births nor bleeds." Every night her husband rapes her, willing her to cry. Kamala remains stoically tearless during the nightly attack. At sunrise, her first tear rolls. She cries a hundred tears every day. Her tears mark the length of the day, from sunrise to sunset. Until the last one drops, signalling the onset of her nightly ordeal.

For those who are unfamiliar with Indian women's literature, *Jungle Girl* is an excellent introduction. It leaves the reader replete, yet hungry for more 🍷

*Chat Garcia Ramilo is manager of Isis International-Manila's Resource Center and Information Program.*