

BOOK REVIEW

A theatre-trotter

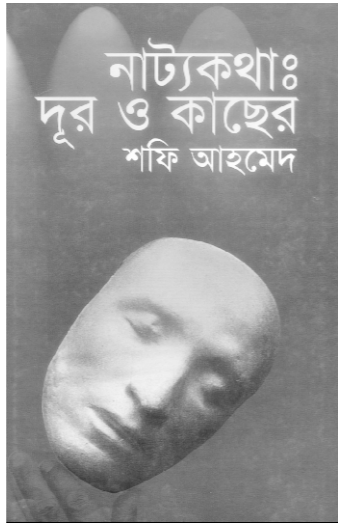
SHAMSAD MORTUZA

NATYAKATHA: Dur O Kachher is a collection of essays on drama and theatre. These essays by Shafi Ahmed, as the title suggests, are from far and wide corners of the world. Primarily written for different little magazines, these essays have eventually found their niche in the present book form in the wrapping illustrated by the 'mindscape artist' Syed Iqbal. In this collection, Ahmed has included ten different essays on Shakespeare, Shakespeare's influence on Tagore, defiance in Tagore's work, Ibsen's Nora and Tagore's Mrinal, the quintessence of Ibsenism in Bangla theatre, expressionism in German theatre, performance of Brecht in Bangladesh, pros and cons of playing host to foreign dramas on local stage, the quest of Wole Soyinka, and an account of Arthur Miller's life. With Ahmed, we travel around the globe to meet both canonical and counter-canonical writers and delve into their works and performances.

Our first stopover is England where Shakespeare, undoubtedly the greatest playwright ever, has become a commodity. Sidestepping issues of commercialisation, Ahmed focuses on artistic reconstruction of Shakespeare. He looks at Tom Stoppard's redoing of Shakespeare's Hamlet under the title of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead. Ahmed gives an account of how Stoppard remoulds two minor characters of Hamlet and reverses its tragic mode. In Stoppard, Hamlet's famous soliloquy "to be or not to be" becomes a commonplace observation "to be intrigued without ever quite being enlightened." On the other hand, Ahmed refers to the Collage Hamlet by Charles Marowitz, to show us how a stage prop like a toy sword can mar the high seriousness of Hamlet's same utterance. Marowitz, Ahmed tells us, consciously attempts to break the Shakespearean myth without disturbing the myth of Hamlet itself. Ahmed's essay, in its brief scope, makes us alive to the idea of intertextuality involving Shakespeare's Hamlet.

The second essay details Shakespeare's influence on Tagore. Tagore, we are told, not only translated Macbeth but also used many Shakespearean imagery in his own works. Ahmed quotes extensively

Safi Ahmed's language is simple yet laden with high seriousness. His perspective and voice is of a pluralist who has adopted different critical tools ranging from Marxism to psychoanalysis, feminism to stylistics.



Natyakatha: Dur O Kachher By Shafi Ahmed Oitihya Publishers; Pg. 150, Tk. 120

both from Shakespeare and Tagore to point out analogous expressions. The next essay involves a different self of Tagore. Here, Ahmed breaks the romantic image of Tagore and upholds elements of defiance and resistance in Tagore's writings. This goes beyond rejection of knighthood by Sir Rabindranath Tagore following the Jalinwalabagh massacre. Ahmed offers a moral reading of Tagore to locate the poet against all social and economic discriminations.

Tagore continues to persist in the fourth essay. Here, a comparative study of Nora and Mrinal - two powerful, female characters from two different worlds provided by Ahmed to suggest the plight of women all over the world are essentially same. Mrinal in Tagore's short story "Streer Patra" (The Letter from a Wife) is not all different from Nora in Norwegian playwright Ibsen's A Doll's House. Ahmed also mentions that the characters of Nora and Mrinal were created following two landmark publications: John Stuart Mill's On the Subjection of Women and Begum Rokeya's Sultana's Dream. However, Ahmed admits that although Tagore's familiarity of Rokeya's work cannot be confirmed, there is a strong possibility that Tagore gave voice to the changing attitude towards women. Throughout this essay (and in other essays

as well), Ahmed refers to the title of Ibsen's drama as A Doll House without any possessive. Now, one wonders whether the possessive ('s) is missing in the original title or is it a working of the proverbial print-monster! Ahmed really should have clarified why he has used A Doll House instead of A Doll's House. And I admit my ignorance in this regard.

Ibsen becomes the lynchpin between the fourth and the fifth essay. Ahmed records how Ibsen's dramas have found currencies in our soil. He mentions some of the transcreations. One such redoing of Ibsen is Shambhu Mitra's adaptation of A Doll House [?]. Ahmed quoted Mitra who thinks it of less importance to include the Tarantula dance in our context. Mitra's rendering of the drama excludes the dance as well replaces the songs with quotation from Tagore. Ahmed's view on universalising of Ibsen is intriguing.

The next essay involves an introductory survey of German expressionist dramas. Like his other essays, Ahmed cites a lot of secondary sources to introduce a particular school of German theatre before local audience. Brecht appears in the following essay. In particular Ahmed looks at performances of Brecht's dramas in local stages. Ahmed holds that with Brecht epic theatre makes its inroads into our

theatre, which, by tradition, has followed proscenium style.

The eighth essay, I think, is the most original one in the whole collection. It appears that this essay was probably read at a seminar where Ahmed lists a number of foreign dramas that our stages have hosted. Ahmed has quite rightly pointed out the issue of acceptance and rejection in line of postcolonial theory while referring to foreign dramatists. He is reminding his fellow theatre men of the odds of choosing a foreign drama and then presenting it before an audience with some set objectives in mind.

In the ninth essay, we move onto Africa to meet the Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka. This again is an introductory piece on Soyinka, heavily laden with secondary sources. One feels that Ahmed should have taken the trouble to translate some of the long excerpts that he has cited, keeping his non-native readers in mind.

The penultimate essay travels to a different continent North America. Here, Ahmed looks at the pros and cons of Miller's so-called immorality. This completes Ahmed's tour of world drama. It is a refreshing experience indeed. Specially, Ahmed's language is simple yet laden with high seriousness. His perspective and voice is of a pluralist who has adopted different critical tools ranging from Marxism to psychoanalysis, feminism to stylistics. At the end of the book, however, one longs to see the non-existent appendix, listing all the books and sources that Ahmed has referred to or quoted. Also, those little magazines or theatre publications should have been named with due credit where these essays were initially published. Surely, Natyakatha: Dur O Kachher would have been a great handy reference book with such reference list. This meager criticism does not intend to vitiate the merit of the book. Ahmed deserves thanks for opening up a whole gamut of the theatre world.

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SHORT STORY

E-mailwallahs

Potter, piracy, and poverty. Through an unusual tale of crisscrossing mails, Farrukh Dhondy, author of Bombay Duck, plays up the ironies and inequities of class in India

Shyamalam C734 Block 13 Lane No. 47 Workers Colony, Shivaji Link Road, Borivili, Bombay

Dear Daddyji,

God protect you and Mataji and our precious jewel Sitambari. I wish I could give better news, but I am conveying only truth. I have no job yet.

I am going everyday on the suburb train, Main-line local it is called, into Bombay proper, and attending at the offices which have given advertise in the newspapers for job vacations. I am every day mostly sitting on benches for waiting time, with some boss then telling that they have no proper vacations for over-qualified gentlemen like me. Sometime I am thinking not to tell them that I am holding my BA and simply to pretend that I am an illiterate swine worthy of doing their humble job. Mostly I think even that will not help because what is going on is that plenty people, mens and womens, are applying for these jobs and only those which are paying the clerk some bribe are getting name on list.

I tried it with ten rupees, I am ashamed to tell you, but god must have been watching because the clerk returned the money and said people are leaving 'big papers' to get this job. I spoke with him kindly and said I have no big papers to impart just this moment but after I get the job he could be on percentage basis. He laughed too much. He told that lump sum was preferred and ask me to borrow it, then only I would get an employment in Bombay.

Acting on this peon's advice I approached Kakaji for a small loan. Now, just because you have brought me up to believe that people must

convey all truth at all times, I wish to state the following. Please believe, Daddyji, this is not with any disrespect for your younger brother who has allowed me into his home and given me a rubber mattress and regular meals and facilities. I am too much grateful, but I must still tell that Kakaji is drinking from bottle all the time, with red eyes and not going to work.

He is also abusing and forgetting who is who. He tells that he loves me and that he loves you as elder brother, but mostly he is abusing the family, the government, his employers who have kicked him out of job and even the Communist union-wallahs who are obtaining suspensions- pay for him from his firm. They are paying something and with that we are surviving, except most is going in bad habits, of which only alcohol I stoop to mention. Somebody have to explain to Kakaji that this is not the way and I am too small a nephew for doing this task. Please you consider a trip this way. I shall most certainly obtain a job, hoping sooner but maybe later. I have never forgotten the mission. Please beg those people, the boy's family to wait just a few week more and then the wage packet will come into their hands for the dowry and they can start having confidence that we are not a pauper family but can marry our jewel, Sitambari, with honour to their boy.

Please convey to Sitambari that I never cease to remember my little sister and will exert all sinews in her favour.

Bombay is a no good city. I went to the temple to pray that rains don't fail, for our fields that God has given and for you.

Mission will be accomplished, boss. I am Optimist! Your loving son

Shyamalam

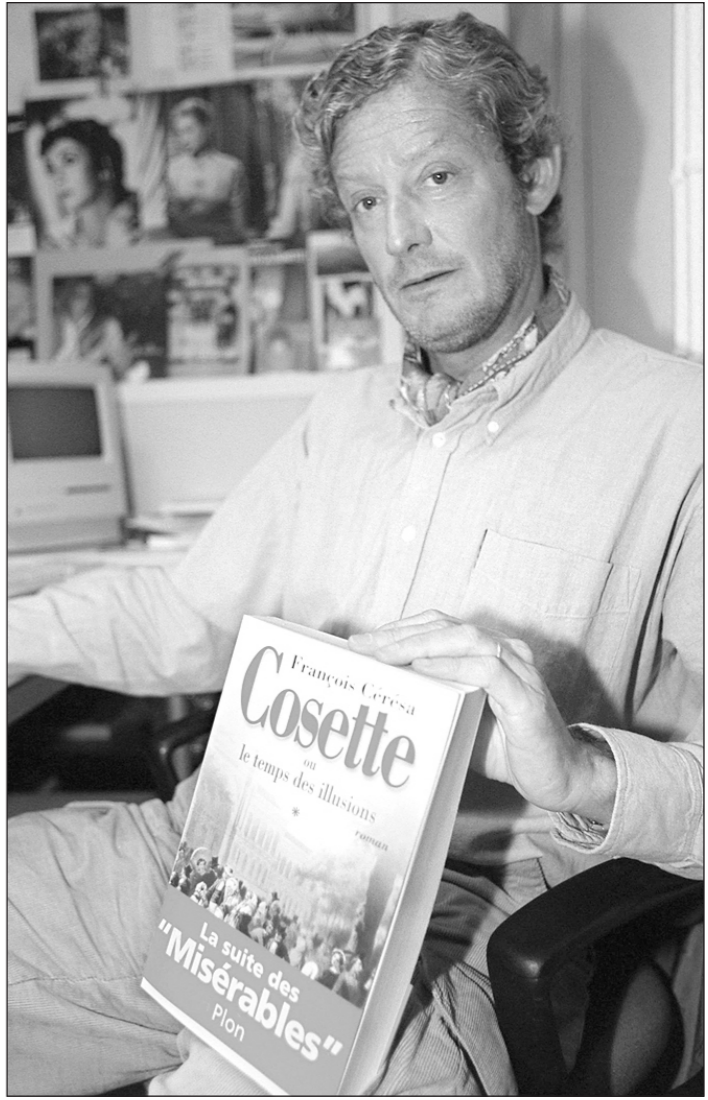


PHOTO: AFP

French author Francois Ceresa poses 24 April 2001 at his office in Paris with his book Cosette ou le Temps des Illusions (Cosette or the time of illusions). Descendants and diehard fans of one of France's literary greats, Victor Hugo, are crying foul over the publication this week of a sequel to the author's epic novel Les Miserables, which they deem an insult to his memory, according to an association representing admirers and descendants 02 May 2001. Their comments were in reaction to Cosette ou le Temps des Illusions, the first of a two-volume sequel to the 1862 epic novel about social injustice.

ESSAY

Women of the South Asian diaspora

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Arranged Marriage and Ginu Kamani's Jungle Girl

REBECCA HAQUE

THE world-wide dispersion of South Asian peoples from countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh is now a sociologically acknowledged phenomenon known as the South Asian Diaspora. Multiple migration from South Asia to Europe, and from Africa to Europe and the United States and multiculturalism is an essential fact of dispersion of such magnitude and dimension.

Voices of the women of the South Asian Diaspora, hitherto silenced by the reconfiguration of patriarchal systems in the new land, are now being heard loud and clear in the 1990s. Two such voices are those of Divakaruni and Kamani. Their collection of short stories Arranged Marriage (1995) and Jungle Girl (1995) provide a platform not only for students of literature, but also for anthropologists and ethnographers who can use the narratives and the narrative voice as the basis for the study of life as it really exists. All the stories are vividly narrated and palpitate with the rhythm of fresh lived experience.

Young, avant-garde, provocative, and born in India, Divakaruni and Kamani both live in the United States and they both use English as their first language. This paper will focus on the way each writer develops brief succinct images of women caught between the old world and the new world values, how women cope with cross-cultural sexual relationships, and how women ultimately try to achieve self-esteem and autonomy denied to them within their own somewhat insular and bigoted community. The attempt to find and fuse a viable self-image within the mainstream United States culture is a crucial factor in the short stories.

Arranged Marriage contains eleven stories out of which I am selecting five stories which deal with women who have traveled to the United States either to live as the spouses of men already living there or as students flying off from India to study in the various American colleges and universities. Most of these stories are first-person narratives and this is what gives them the quality of immediacy and interaction with the reader; we are bound to become involved in the lives of these women. The prose in Divakaruni's prize-winning volume is lucid and penetrating and it takes us effortlessly into the heart of the matter. "Clothes" is the story of one arranged marriage, between Mita

and Somesh Sen who lives in California and owns a 7-Eleven store there. It opens on a magical note: "The water of the women's lake laps against my breasts, cool, calming. I can feel it beginning to wash the hot nervousness away from my body. . . . I close my eyes and smell the sweet brown odor of the ritha pulp my friends Deepali and Radha are working into my hair so it will glisten with little lights this evening. They scrub with more vigor than usual and wash it out more carefully, because today is a special day. It is the day of my bride-viewing". Mita dreams of a handsome prince who will take her to his kingdom beyond the seven seas, and her father shows her on the globe where California is situated exactly. Back in the States, living in one cramped apartment with her in-laws, Somesh and Mita secretly dream of living the American dream once Somesh has made enough money to finish off paying the loan on his shop and strike out on his own and be totally independent. In the meantime, Mita maintains the status quo and remains the meek, submissive daughter-in-law. But "Late at night I stand in front of our bedroom mirror trying on the clothes Somesh has bought for me and smuggled in past his parents. I model each one for him. . . . just like the models on TV, while he whispers applause. I am breathless with suppressed laughter (Father and mother Sen must not hear) and my cheeks are hot with the delicious excitement of conspiracy. . . . I'm wearing a pair of jeans now, marveling at the curves of my hips and thighs, which have always been hidden under the flowing lines of my saris. I love the color, the same pale blue as the nayanantara flowers that grow in my parents' garden. The solid comforting weight. The jeans come with a close-fitting T-shirt which outlines my breasts. . . . The T-shirt is sunrise-orange color. I decide, of joy, of my new American life".

Mita's joy and her honeymoon comes to an abrupt end, however, when one night Somesh is killed at his store by a gunman in an act of robbery and random violence. We then see the other Asian women dress Mita all in white and hear the sound of glass bangles shattering as Mita is quietly and absolutely transformed from a glowing bride into a mourning widow, now forever the property of her in-laws who will now go back to India. But Somesh had wanted Mita to go to college, choose a career and this makes Mita rebel against tradition and make her own choice as to her future path in life; she takes her fate

into her own hands: "I know I cannot go back. I don't know yet how I'll manage, here in this new, dangerous land. I only know I must. Because all over India, at this very moment, widows in white saris are bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws. Doves with cut-off wings. . . . I straighten my shoulders and stand taller, take a deep breath. . . . I tilt my chin, readying myself for the arguments of the coming weeks, the remonstrations. In the mirror a woman holds my gaze, her eyes apprehensive yet steady. She wears a blouse and skirt the color of almonds".

The conclusion of "The Ultra-sound" is not as definitive or as positive as the conclusion of "Clothes." Although it defies closure, it leaves us nevertheless with a sense of unease as to the ultimate fate of Arundhati. The story is narrated by Anju and she traces the different routes that her and Runu's life take as they grow up together in Calcutta. Both without father's, but with hard-working, struggling mothers, their lives take different courses because Anju's father had left his wife money and property in the form of a bookstore in a prime College Street location, whereas Runu's father, dying after a long illness had left only debts and "Protima-auntie, like most genteel Bengali widows, was always struggling to make ends meet. Runu never had new dresses and shoes like me, or large plush teddy bears or wind-up dolls from America that could dance and say hello. Or, later, silk saris or gold earrings with matching bracelets for the birthdays. But she wouldn't let me give her any of my things. . . . Somehow she never did as well academically either, though I believed she was quite as intelligent as I was. Encouraged by my mother to be competitive, I went on to win spelling bees and debate contests, and later in college to grapple with Chaucer and Thomas Hardy and W. B. Yeats in my English Honors classes. I browsed through our bookstore and the USIS library, reading Hemingway and Kerouac and Willa Cather and longing to visit the places they wrote of. Runu took up Home Science, which everyone admitted was the major that the dullest girls chose. She seemed to enjoy it, though. . . . So maybe it's fitting that Prajapati, the winged and capricious god of marriage, set us down in such different places here in San Jose with Sunil, and her in provincial Burdwan, the eldest daughter-in-law of a large, traditional brahmin family".

Anju keeps up with Runu through long-distance phone calls to her own mother and sometimes to Runu herself at her place in Burdwan, and it seems like an act of mercy and an act of god certainly when both become pregnant at the same time. They eagerly await the results of their respective amniocentesis tests, but when it is revealed that Runu's fetus is female her husband and her in-laws want her to go for an abortion and try later for a male child. Naturally, Runu runs away from home, and Anju aghast at the criminal form of prenatal female infanticide being perpetrated on innocent victims vow to try to bring Runu to America at all costs. She ends: "Tomorrow I'll ask Sunil about sponsoring Runu, maybe getting her a student visa. I know he'll fight it at first, give me a hundred reasons why we can't do it. Why we shouldn't. But I'll fight back. Already I am learning how. I'll use what I have to my pregnancy, even. It's worth it for Runu and, yes, myself. I'll get my way. I know I will, I say to myself, and smiling, I drift into sleep". The reader, however cannot retreat safely or securely into this somnolent daze with Anju, because we know, as Divakaruni knows, that visas and immigration take time and money and patience and Runu back in Calcutta has none of these things at her disposal. Who will take care of her in the meantime? What will become of her? Will Anju be able to save her? We can only hope and pray.

The protagonist-narrator of "The Word Love" has her own deep problems with her own widowed mother back in Calcutta. The nameless protagonist, a Ph.D. student at Berkeley, has fallen in love with an American and is living with him, but she loves her mother fiercely too and is terrified of her finding out that she is living in sin and living for love, for her mother would never understand, would never forgive. To forestall any event of her mother ever finding out she has given strict injunctions to her lover never to answer the phone. "It isn't you, you'd said, gathering up the books guiltily, smoothing the covers. Holding them tight against you. 'I'd have the same problems no matter who it was.' You tried to tell him about your mother, how she'd seen her husband's face for the first time at her wedding. How, when he died (you were two years old then), she had taken off her jewelry and put on widow's white and dedicated the rest of her life to the business of bringing you up. We only have each other, she often told you. 'She lives in a different world. Can't you see that? She's never traveled more than a hundred miles from the village where she was born; she's

never touched cigarettes or alcohol; even though she lives in Calcutta, she's never watched a movie. . . . I love her, Rex".

The inevitable happens nevertheless, the phone is one day answered by Rex and the relationship between mother and daughter is torn asunder. The mother willfully changes her phone number and moves to a new location, and all of the daughter's letters are returned to her unopened, address unknown. The mother is righteous in her anger and cruelly disowns the daughter for her act of sacrifice. The daughter, on the other hand, cannot accept this separation, this yawning gulf, this denunciation and her guilt in turn destroys her relationship with Rex. But she does not give up altogether. She vows to make a new life for herself and to make it on her own: ". . . you will pack your belongings. A few clothes, some music, a favorite book, . . . . And a word comes to you out of the opening sky. The word love. You see that you had never understood it before. It is like rain, and when you lift your face to it, like rain it washes away essentials, leaving you hollow, clean, ready to begin".

Divakaruni makes us realize that all human relationships are in fact a gamble, a throw of the dice, a matter of chance and destiny. Arranged marriages are no more or less so than the ones made out of love and choice. All marriages, it is said, are made in heaven, but we cannot begin to realize what powerful urges and inchoate emotions makes the wife in "The Disappearance" turn her back upon her own arranged marriage and quietly disappear in the urban jungles of the cities of America into a self-made exile. She even leaves her son behind and takes only her wedding jewelry, only the pieces given to her by her own parents. It is a complete renunciation of her alliance with her husband and total disavowal of her parenthood. Was she so unhappy, trapped in a loveless marriage? or was she mentally unstable? We never find out, for she is never found, even though her husband puts up a reward of \$100,000 for any information leading to her whereabouts. The man's widowed mother shuts up her small flat back in India and is delighted to come and keep house for her son and grandson in the new country: "As the year went on, the husband stopped thinking as much about the wife. It wasn't that he loved her any less, or that the shock of her disappearance was less acute. It was just that it wasn't on his mind all the time. There would be stretches of timewhen he was on the phone with

an important client, or when he was watching after-dinner TV or driving his son to kiddie gym class when he would forget that his wife was gone, that he had had a wife at all. And even when he remembered that he had forgotten, he would experience only a slight twinge, similar to what he felt in his teeth when he drank something too cold too fast. The boy, too, didn't ask as often about his mother. He was sleeping through the nights again, he had put on a few pounds (because he was finally being fed right, said the grandmother), and he had started calling her 'Ma,' just like his father did".

A marriage can fall apart for many reasons, tangible like marital infidelity or intangible like the oft-quoted "irreconcilable differences" of American divorce cases. Divakaruni presents us with one case where the cause of the breakup is a visitor from India. In "Doors," Preeti, living in the United States since the age of twelve marries Deepak, a man straight out of India, and receives a giant culture shock when his friend Raj comes to Berkeley to stay with them while he does his Master's there. The men carry the buddy-buddy thing too far and encroach upon Preeti's privacy. Raj especially is a loud and a boor as well as a bore, but Deepak is delighted to have him in the house and relive their schooldays and look at endless videos of Kishore Kumar songs. Much to Preeti's chagrin, her private space is violated one day when her bedroom door is thrown open by Raj who walks in to share a piece of good news. Like Deepak, Raj too is from the old country where there is little use for closed doors and privacy in a large traditional family. Raj is simply bewildered by Preeti's extreme reaction and decides to leave her house. Simultaneously, Preeti, too decides to leave her marriage: "Preeti would shut the study door before settling down with her Ph.D. dissertation. When in the garden, she would make sure the gate was securely fastened as she weeded. If there had been a door to the kitchen, she would have closed it as she cooked. Deepak was puzzled by all this door shutting. He had grown up in a large family, and although they had been affluent enough to possess three bedrooms. . . . they had never observed boundaries. They had constantly spilled into each other's rooms, doors always left open for chance remarks and jokes. He asked Preeti about it one night just before bed. . . . She wasn't able to give him an answer, 'I don't know,' she said, her brow wrinkled. . . . I guess I am just a private person. It's

not like I am shutting you out. I've just always done it this way. Maybe it has something to do with being an only child.' Her eyes searched his face unhappily. 'I know it's not what you are reused to. Does it bother you?' She seemed so troubled that Deepak felt a pang of guilt 'No, no, I don't care, not at all,' he rushed to say. . . . And really, he didn't mind, even though he didn't quite understand. People were different. He knew that. And he was more than ready to accept the unique needs of this exotic creature Indian and yet not Indian who had by some mysterious fortune become his wife. So things went on smoothly until Raj descended on them".

Ginu Kamani's prose is no less trenchant and penetrating than Divakaruni's. In Jungle Girl, Kamani has two stories, one at the beginning and one at the end, which are about women of the South Asian Diaspora. The word "jungle" in Kamani's title refers to the sense of wildness that comes with freedom, sexual as well as social. The protagonists of Kamani's stories are young, good-looking, well-educated second generation Indians living in the West. They are confident about themselves, their position, their identity and their sexuality. The stories are optimistic and buoyant and Kamani's prose vividly renders this buoyancy transferable to the reader as well.

"Ciphers" is the enigmatic title of the first story. It refers to the identity of the protagonist herself which is an enigma to the Gujarati woman with whom she happens to be sharing a berth on a train while travelling in India. With her hair cut short, and in a knee-length dress, but with her dark complexion, the Gujarati woman finds it very difficult to place the protagonist. The story slowly weaves back and forth between the attempts of the Gujarati woman to pin the protagonist down as an identifiable ethnic entity Bengali, Maharashtrian, Punjabi, Moslem from Delhi, or a Christian from Goa and the protagonists own definition of herself as "other, oblique" in this society where being just Indian had no meaning. Definition meant belonging to a certain class or ethnic group within the melting pot of races and she wonders if she would have been more recognizable and definable in a sari or a shalwar kameez? In the United States she is no more definable and her Indianness disappears in her chameleon like ability to be taken for any race, from Brazilian to Mexican. Towards the end of the story, the protagonist asserts that what matters is not where she comes from but the fact

that she is different because she has sexual power and she is definitely a sexual being in opposition to the Gujarati woman who is just a mother with her palloo over her head. At this point in the story the true meaning of the title is forced into our awareness as we realize that the Gujarati woman is as much a "Cipher" to the protagonist as she is to her, for here in a sudden move the Gujarati woman removes her palloo and uncoils her dark coiling hair and the protagonist is shocked at the truly strikingly sensual and sexual beauty of the woman. In a lyrical conclusion the protagonist achieves a kind of epiphany as she feels a oneness with all Indian women and literally feels a tingling in her groin and at the roots of her hair as in her imagination she sees herself being transformed with long hair which so bewitchingly frames and captures the essence of every Indian woman.

The penultimate story in Kamani's collection is a sharp diatribe against the Indian expatriate community where the elders take it upon themselves to make the lives of their Americanized daughters miserable by trying to trap them into arranged marriages with who-soever is considered suitable and is available. In "Just Between Indians," eighteen-year old Daya has her vacation spoiled as her parents and friends zoom in on her as the target for a favorable match between Ranjan, the older brother of Sahil. But Daya rebels against any such occurrence not only verbally but also insidiously by undermining the rules of her patriarchal upbringing quietly and secretly has sex with Sahil one night before she leaves the house. The conclusion of the story is a glorious celebration of Daya's freedom and her ability to metamorphose into a beautiful woman for any man who looks at her. This ability comes, as Kamani points out, from her Indian, South Asian origins, where so many races and bloodlines mingle and blend to give her a unique quality of indefinable mystery.