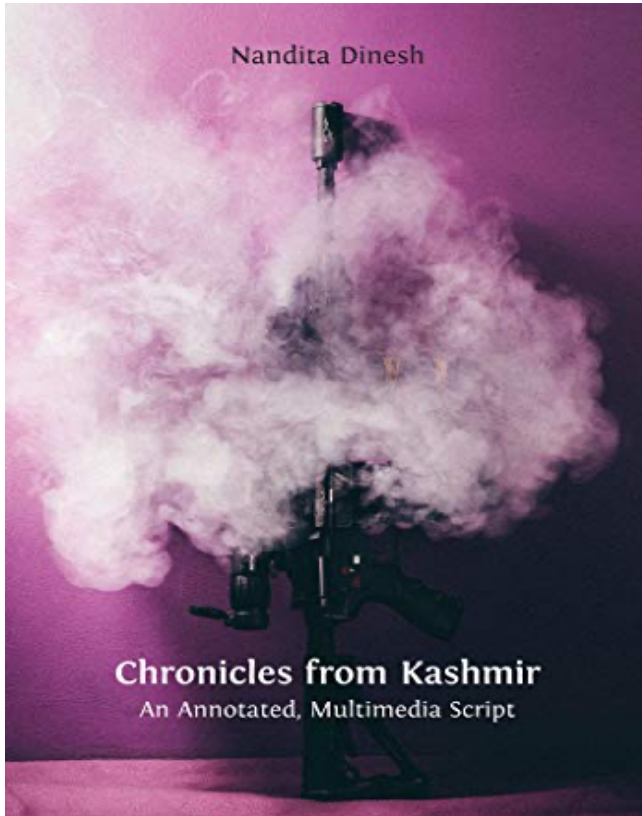


Nandita Dinesh, *Chronicles from Kashmir: An Annotated, Multimedia Script*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2020. I-xiv+238 pp. ISBN 978-1-80064-017-7.



Reviewing Nandita Dinesh’s *Chronicles from Kashmir: An Annotated, Multimedia Script* (2020) is a challenging task. The book is a collaborative work between the scholar-playwright Nandita Dinesh and Ensemble Kashmir Theatre Akademi (EKTA), a Kashmir-based School of Drama & Repertory founded by Bhawani Bashir Yasir, “a theatre professional and a Kashmiri nationalist.” Such a project, as Yasir himself points out in his introduction, involves “potential security risks” and invites “suspicions of secret agendas” (xii). When performed in the early years, it did invite a strong suspicion and distrust of the state authorities, resistance groups and even common people. The main thrust of the book, as Dinesh puts it, is:

“What is happening in Kashmir?” (1). The play is overtly “political” in content and experimental in representational techniques. The personal histories of the directors, actors, and the Kashmiri audience get enmeshed with the social and political history of the place, in the process blurring the lines between reality and representation. Highly theoretical in approach, the play is flexible in structure, encouraging as it does adaptability to new situations.

The script of the performance on which the book is based was in the process of making from 2012 to 2018. Keeping pace with the changing ground reality in the geo-cultural space called Kashmir, *Chronicles from Kashmir* went through several revisions. As a result of direct interactions with her team and members of the audience who were invited to watch and participate in the play, Dinesh’s understanding of the situation also underwent changes. Born of polyvocal visions, the play, as it appears in the book, pays attention to the multiple, complex, often colliding aspects and perspectives of the lived experience of the people of the state. As facets of the history of Kashmir are performed in front of different local groups, they immediately responded, often very strongly and unfavourably. As resistance grew and state repressions increased, and as incidents like the abrogation of Article 370 took place in 2019, popular response to the performances changed in tone and tenor. Common people from different walks of life who formed the audience of the play questioned the very purpose of representing in the play the daily rituals of terror they undergo on a regular basis. At such a point of her experience, Dinesh had to acknowledge that her “grandiose notions of sharing work about an Other with an Other” was misconceived as the playwright’s attempt to project the reality through the mirror of representation caused unimaginable pain to them.

Based on her realization, she broadened her target audience to “others like myself. Non-Kashmiris. Foreigners. Outsiders” (11). She began to believe that “[n]othing I could create in Kashmir, could be for Kashmiris” (11). In fact, this sense of her own “outsiderness,” the difficulty of approaching the “insiders,” and having a dialogue with them pervade the entire work. As the perception that “the play would be more suitable for an audience of non-Kashmiris” (12) gained ground, “a team of about twelve artists went to Kamshet, in western India” in 2017 (12). The plan of a 24-hour performance for a non-Kashmiri audience on which *Chronicles from Kashmir* is founded had its beginning here. During its second performance in Kamshet, the police showed up and interrogated Dinesh about the Kashmir connection of the performance. In his introduction to the book, Yasir observes that the police raid “showed us all how the word ‘Kashmir’ is disturbing for Indian authoritarian rulers” (xiii). The next day’s performance which was meant for the students of a local school had to be called off. It has not been possible to perform the play since 2017.

It is only after the above experience Dinesh decided to publish the written text of the performance accompanied by films of the scenes. This is how *Chronicles from Kashmir* was born in the form of a book. Yasir's valuable introduction explains the history of the collaboration of EKTA with Nandita Dinesh and his own understanding of its significance. Nandita Dinesh in her prefatory chapter entitled "Summaries and Deconstructions" provides a brief history of Kashmir, *Kashmiriyat*, its polyvocal cultures, and its "huge Kashmiri Diaspora" (4). She explains how *Chronicles from Kashmir* evolved between 2011 and 2018 in three distinct ways: a) "from being a doctoral project to becoming a longer-term undertaking"; b) "from being a piece with no particular durational restrictions, to becoming a 24-hour immersive experience"; and c) "from being a play conceptualized for the theatre, to straddling the worlds of theatre, writing, film, and education" (5). The third point mentioned above explains the elaborate pedagogical instructions embedded in the script of the play. The instructions help readers pick up particular, mostly symbolic, points and interpret them in innovative ways as well as adapting them to new situations.

Dinesh also explains how she herself developed as a theoretically and aesthetically informed reader and playwright, as she charts out how the idea of the script developed gradually. She read Griselda Gambaro's book *Information for Foreigners* (1992) and Susan Haedicke's article "The Politics of Participation: *Un Voyage Pas Comme Les Autres Sur Le Chemins De l'Exil*" (2002) very carefully. She explains how the two works mentioned above formed the basis of the transformative experience of working for *The Chronicles from Kashmir*. She mentions three specific aspects: a) "immersive aesthetics – works that are multisensorial and alter traditional modes of engagement between audience and spectators;" b) "the use of promenade – where the audience walks from one space to another rather than engaging with a performance in one, predetermined location and position;" and c) "site responsive strategies – where performances take place in response to unexpected spaces" (6). The entire play is based on these three dramatic principles.

The play proper includes twenty-three scenes (including Scene 0), five Installations, four Coalitions, and a section called "A Wedding and a Curfewed Night" (Parts I and II). The word "Installation" is used here to refer to a museum space full of exhibits. These exhibits are put under several categories: interactive questions, gallery components, word cluster displays, reading sections, and BuzzFeed booths. All these project Kashmiri cultural elements such as literary works, traditional songs, artistic pieces on Kashmir, and even Bollywood songs. The members of the audience are expected to gather knowledge and impressions from them in order to be properly equipped to assess the socio-cultural and political situation in Kashmir. While traversing the ground between two scenes, the audience will be able to pick up insights from this museum space to understand and critique the contents. The insights gained may also include the

ways of how Kashmir and its people are exoticised and stereotyped. The members of the audience may also like to relax here for a short while, browse over the exhibits, reflect on them, and respond to these in their own ways. Installation A, for instance, contains, among other things, Lalita Pandit's poem "Anantnag" (1996), Rahul Pandita's *On Kashmir and Its Stories* (2013), and Varad Sharma's *The Prolonged Wait: Kashmir Lives on in the Hearts and Minds of Pandits* (2017). The sections called "Coalition" are more interactive in-between spaces where members of the audience collaborate with one another in creating an environment suitable for the spirit of the play. The term is explained thus: 'The sections called COALITIONS are spaces of collaborative creation; a group of people coming together, albeit temporarily, to "make something": an atmosphere, a spirit, a hope, a recognition' (115). While the concepts of both "Installations" and "Coalitions" seem very appropriate and appealing in the context of a play fashioned on a promenade theatre model, the second term, this reviewer feels, remains a bit vague in the context of the play. Neither does he understand why a section called "A WEDDING and a CURFEWED NIGHT," unlike others, is left without any category or nomenclature or why this cannot be considered a scene as well. This does not, however, mean that "Coalitions" are a mere appendage to the play; they are very much evocative of the lived experience of the common Kashmiris, and can really play a very effective functional role in the play.

Chronicles from Kashmir as a whole is conceived in terms of a journey. A group of tourists are engaged in travelling through Kashmir and two Guides, one of them being an "outsider," take them from one space to another. Each of these spaces is the site of a dramatic scene. The spaces they visit are unique in their own ways. But while moving through them, they encounter incidents which are symptomatic of what has been happening in Kashmir or evocative of what happened there in the recent past. These include the exodus of the Pandits (Scene Two) and the Sikhs (Scene Ten), the plight of women during the conflict (Scene Three), teaching a teacher how to control a student through electric shock (Scene One), surveillance on art and performance by state agents (Scene Four), teaching state agents (like police officer and armed forces officer) how to control rebellious people (Scene Five), a visit to the hideout of resistance groups (often portrayed as militants) that endangered the lives of the tourists (Scene Eighteen), and so on.

The scenes move on like this, creating a grim picture of contemporary Kashmir and evoking historical memories of peaceful coexistence of different ethnic groups. Last few scenes are more optimistic than the earlier ones in the sense that they project possibilities of "Repatriation/Reintegration/Rehabilitation/Reconstruction" of the Pandits and necessary policy changes in that regard (204). "Scene Twenty-Two: The Hope" recognises that "[w]e have learned from our dead that / diversity and difference are not a weakness, / but rather a strength" (221). The last section of the book called "The Last Coalition"

carries this lesson forward, brings together the important parts of speeches from earlier scenes that highlight positive vibes, and problematises the concept of the “outsider.” Interestingly, after each chapter, members of the audience are gifted with stone souvenirs marked with specific comments/observations – these stones are meant to be carried in their luggage as they move forward. This is very suggestive. At the end of each performance, they learn something very special about the lived experience of the Kashmiris, and this sinks heavy in their consciousness. They become wiser about Kashmir than they had ever been.

The multimedia script is very innovative and highly experimental in nature. It employs a symbolic and semiotic approach. It allows enough scope for developing and extending the significance of the images and icons. This play on Kashmir attempts to establish links with other conflict zones like Palestine through pedagogic means such as questions, suggestions, instructions, hints, and internet links provided in the boxes in each section. The scenes are designed effectively with potent symbols, and the sensitive issues are presented in a balanced way. This play on “conflict tourism” will undoubtedly create ripples among theatre goers and people engaged in the politics of representation.

Himadri Lahiri
Netaji Subhas Open University, India
Email: hlahiri@gmail.com