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Love, Art, and Immortality

The Experience of Transcendence through *Rasa* in Tom Stoppard's *Indian Ink*

Abstract

British playwright Tom Stoppard's radio play *In the Native State* (1991) and its stage version *Indian Ink* (1995) attest to Stoppard's fascination with the country in which he spent his childhood. The play originated with his idea of wanting to write about the circular situation of a poet who sits for a portrait, while writing about the painting. Set in both colonial India and contemporary Britain, the play deals with the themes of colonialism, love, and art. Even as critical discussions of the play invariably highlight the political and cultural tensions between the East and the West, the elaborate discussions of classical Indian aesthetic theory found in the play have not yet been analysed in depth. Specifically, the spiritual significance of the *rasa* theory and its implications for Stoppard's later work on consciousness has seldom been studied. The present essay argues that the play *Indian Ink* marks the beginning of Stoppard's continued engagement with the aesthetic and religious philosophy of ancient India. Here, in particular, may be seen the emergence of the idea of a Universal Consciousness that transcends space and time, which closely resembles the Vedantic conception of Brahman.

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Introduction

Having lived in India as a child refugee of Czech origin, Tom Stoppard has always retained fond memories and a deep emotional connection with the country. When his radio play *In the Native State*, set in colonial India, first aired on BBC Radio 3 in 1991, it received widespread praise, with critics calling it Stoppard's "finest" play to date (Coveney 1993; Fleming 2001, 212). In many ways, it marked a departure from his usual style of drama: it was his first play with a strongly multicultural theme and cast; it was an emotionally engaging play written in a free-flowing lyrical style; it focussed mainly on its charming protagonist Flora Crewe instead of his usual ideas-driven dialogue. The main character held such fascination for Stoppard that he later transferred her story to the stage, rewriting it into the expanded version titled *Indian Ink* (1995). While critics have analysed the political and cultural themes of the play, its deep spiritual undercurrents—especially with reference to the Indian aesthetic theory of *rasa*—have long been overlooked. In particular, the Vedantic conception of Brahman or Universal Consciousness as well as the oneness of all life, which have deeply influenced the evolution of Indian art and its theory of aesthetic reception, can be seen as the substratum of one of the predominant themes discussed in this play. In fact, many of these fundamental ideas of spirituality and consciousness have informed much of Stoppard's recent work, too—as I (2022) argue in my study of consciousness as conceived in his Stoppard's recent plays, *Darkside* (2013) and *The Hard Problem* (2015). Since much of the dialogue, characters, and plot points are identical in both *In the Native State* and its stage version, it would suffice to consider the latter to trace how *Indian Ink* marks the beginning of Stoppard's continued engagement with the aesthetic and religious philosophy of ancient India.

As in his masterpiece *Arcadia* (1993) which appeared between the radio and stage versions of this play, the plot in *Indian Ink* also alternates between two timelines: 1930, in colonial India, and in the mid-1980s, in both India and England. The stage space is similarly shared by characters across periods and geographical boundaries, allowing characters of both time periods to freely walk past one another, yet interact only with others belonging to their own timeline. A plot summary may be useful to identify key themes.

Outline of the Plot

The play begins with Flora Crewe, a young English poet travelling on medical advice to the fictional Indian state of Jummapur early in the summer of 1930. Most events that unfold are simultaneously narrated in Flora's own voice as letters written to her young sister back home. Closer to the present day, these distant memories are revisited by Flora's sister Eleanor Swan who lives as a lonely old dowager in Shepperton. She reads through all the old letters in her possession in the presence of the American academic Eldon Cooper Pike, who prods her memory for details to include in a collection of Flora's correspondence that he is annotating.

Flora visits social clubs and literary societies in India delivering talks on "'Literary Life in London', in return for board and lodging" (Stoppard [1995] 1999, 397).[1] Her lecture at the Theosophical Society in Jummapur is received enthusiastically and among her audience is the Rajasthani painter Nirad Das who sketches her as she speaks. The poet and the painter quickly build a rapport and Flora's mention of his offer to paint her makes Pike speculate on an arcane reference to a nude watercolour in one of her later letters. Eleanor dismisses the idea, insisting

that Flora's only nude by Modigliani had been destroyed. Instead, she shows him her sole surviving likeness—an unsigned oil painting of a fully clothed Flora. Pike uses it as cover image for the *Collected Letters* he publishes with excessive and pedantic footnotes.

Soon after the publication, Eleanor has a surprise visitor: Anish Das, an Indian painter settled in England, introduces himself as the son of Flora's unidentified portraitist. Somewhat sceptical of his claim, Eleanor begins to argue with him, since their interpretations of colonial history are starkly opposed. However, they soon make up and Anish quickly sketches her as a sign of goodwill. She enquires about his father and recounts the time she too lived in India. They both drift into reminiscences about the little-known time Das and Flora spent together.

Flora is at work on a poem about heat, while the portrait painting goes on for days. Das, appreciative of her patience and trust in his work, gifts her a copy of Emily Eden's *Up the Country*, a travelogue by another English poet. While sitting for him, Flora tells him how a jealous ex-fiancé burnt her Modigliani nude. Meanwhile David Durance, an English officer in Jummapur, calls on Flora. He has been instructed to keep an eye on her as a "politically sensitive" visitor since she carries letters of introduction from the British communist Joshua Chamberlain (474). However, Durance quickly drops his formal air and invites her to the British Club for a weekend dance. Later, when Das resumes painting, Flora relates to him the difficulty she feels in writing her poem. Das then explains to her the Indian aesthetic theory of *rasa*, elaborating on *śṛṅgāra*, the *rasa* of erotic love found in the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa legend, which provides her a key to understanding her own work better.[2]

Pike, in the meantime, lands in Jummapur on a mission to unravel the mystery of the nude portrait. In his wild goose chase after the "missing portrait," all he learns is the name of Flora's portraitist. Back in England, Anish sees the original oil painting by his father and is moved to tears. He explains to Eleanor that it is unfinished since his father had abandoned it to work on the nude watercolour of Flora which he has brought along to show Eleanor.

Das is troubled and unable to paint when he discovers that Flora, unbeknownst to him, has switched from working on her poem to writing a letter. Though angry at first, he quickly warms up to enquire about her sister. However, when he learns Flora has seen the unfinished portrait in his absence but refrained from commenting, he feels insulted and rips up his earlier pencil sketch of Flora. The ensuing tussle overwhelms Flora's weak lungs and she collapses in a breathless heap. Das has to support and bathe her as she comes to. Flora, now naked from the bath but slowly recovering, asks if Das would like to paint her nude, as she feels she would have more *rasa* as a nude subject (424). She then explains her earlier reluctance to comment on his work as her disappointment at Das's European-style painting instead of an authentic Indian work: "You're trying to paint me from my point of view instead of yours – what you *think* is my point of view. You *deserve* the bloody Empire!" (427). She contrasts his oversensitive reaction to her own experience of weathering the storms of public infamy for writing erotically charged poetry. However, Das accuses Flora of behaving like a coloniser and underlines the damage done by the English to his artistic tradition. The eventful evening finally deepens their friendship as they both overcome cultural barriers enough to understand each other's perspective on art.

Flora keeps her appointment with Durance and is entertained at the Jummapur Club, but she is disconcerted that her health condition is common knowledge there. Durance insinuates that Das might have put about the gossip. The next day, the Rajah of Jummapur invites her to a show of his antique motor cars and, as a sign of friendship, allows her to view

his private collection of paintings, including erotic ones; he even gifts her one of them. Soon afterwards, when Das visits Flora, she accuses him of freely sharing her private details, but he explains the British authorities may have learnt them by spying on her mail. As a sign of renewed friendship, Das presents her with her nude portrait on paper in traditional Rajput style. The miniature painting, suffused with *śṛṅgāra*, pleases Flora who is now alone in the dark, deserted bungalow with Das.

The next day, Flora reports to her sister that she has finished the poem concerning heat that she had been struggling with earlier and hints at having had a sexual encounter of which her sister may disapprove. (Pike, of course, incorrectly identifies the man in question as Durance.) The affair proves to be one of her defining experiences of India: she records in her letter her affectionate hope that ". . . perhaps my soul will stay behind as a smudge of paint on paper, as if I'd always been here, like Radha who was the most beautiful of the herdswomen, undressed for love in an empty house" (480). She dies shortly afterwards and is buried in India. After some months, it is while visiting Flora's grave that young Eleanor meets the English officer Eric Swan whom she later marries.

Some of the major themes in the play may already be apparent: the enduring power of art set against the evanescence of life, the potent force of erotic love, the complex political and cultural tensions between the British and Indians, but alongside these, the persistent possibility of personal reconciliation. There is also a larger theme that appears in all of Stoppard's plays from the 1990s—the disinterested pursuit of knowledge as the purpose of life. It is interesting to see the bearing of ancient Indian philosophy on some of these themes.

Apologia for the Empire or Quest for the Absolute?

Critical attention has so far been directed mostly at Stoppard's commentary on—and for some critics, his complicity with—the British imperial project.[3] After providing a detailed analysis of how the play constructs the opposing ideas of 'Britishness' and 'Indianness,' Josephine Lee concludes somewhat pessimistically: "What emerges is only a gesture towards hybridity, the possibility of movement across what seems like an insurmountable divide" (2001, 50). Laurie Kaplan's (1998) focus is on another form of East-West divide: Pike's failure to align himself to the reality of India and his attempted transformation by the end of the play. Two prominent drama scholars from India who engage with Stoppard's play—Nandi Bhatia and Tutun Mukherjee—choose to view it as a part of the infamous Raj genre that has merely reinforced orientalist cultural stereotypes and served to justify colonial politics. While Bhatia explicitly attempts "reading the play against the grain of its intended meanings" (2009, 224), Mukherjee dismisses the possibility that an enduring and meaningful relationship could ever be forged between the coloniser and the colonised (2017, 140). Their postcolonial readings, in choosing to draw attention to the echoes of E. M. Forster and Paul Scott in the play, do not seem to allow for any major Indian influence on the playwright (except, perhaps, Nirad C. Chaudhuri).[4] However, a careful consideration of the treatment of *rasa* in the play suggests that Stoppard has not only studied classical Indian aesthetics and philosophy as part of his research but has also made it the spiritual basis of this play and many others to follow.

A notable exception among critics who only see irreconcilable socio-cultural differences between the East and the West reflected in the play is Richard Rankin Russell. His essay (2004) draws attention to the ability of artistic exchange to heal differences and

highlights the role of the Theosophical Society as a backdrop of the play, with its ideal of Universal Brotherhood. However, he considers Theosophy "a confusing amalgam of various world religions" and suggests that Stoppard mainly employed one aspect of the Theosophist belief system, "the ability to interact with the dead – as a controlling metaphor for this drama" just as chaos theory supplied the governing metaphor for *Arcadia* (10). His discussion focusses more on the British rulers' discomfort with the occult and a growing nationalist movement than on the overlap of Theosophical ideas with Indian religious thought, especially the influence of Vedanta.[5] Although it lies outside the scope of this paper to elaborate on the connection between the Theosophical belief in Universal Brotherhood, the Vedantic concept of transpersonal Self, and Stoppard's own ideas on God and consciousness as seen in his later plays, it might prove a promising avenue to explore in future research. However, for the purpose of the present analysis, it would suffice to note that Stoppard is strongly opposed to viewing consciousness as a material phenomenon—as mainstream Western science and philosophy often assume—and seeks instead a spiritual explanation for it. This opens up the possibility of reading his plays in the light of a Vedantic conception of consciousness, especially the Upanishadic statement "*prajñānam brahma"* or "*Brahman* is the Supreme Consciousness"[6]—one of the foundational sayings (*mahāvākya*) of Advaita.[7]

Art and Immortality

Like *Arcadia, Indian Ink*, too, centres on a brilliant woman from the past and the attempts by researchers and relatives in the present to piece together the elusive details of her life. As in many of Stoppard's earlier works, death is lurking in the shadows, but Flora, unlike many of his earlier protagonists, chooses to be unafraid. Whereas, say, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are terrified at the thought of their deaths, Flora is, as Hermione Lee observes, "impetuous, worldly and gallantly stoic about the lung disease which is soon to kill her" (2020, 387). In the poem she composes as she sits for her portrait, Flora writes: "– or think if you prefer, of a corpse in a ditch / I have been left for dead before –" (Stoppard [1995] 1999, 403). Despite her poor health, she responds quite casually to Das's concerned question if she is dying: "I expect so, but I intend to take years and years about it" (426).

Like Thomasina in *Arcadia* who achieves immortality through her posthumous Coverley set, Flora too finds her eternal life in art—both Das's and her own. Eleanor, however, is understandably upset that Flora's poetry failed to garner the critical attention it deserved in her lifetime, that "she missed it all . . . students and professors so *interested* and so sweet about her poetry. Nobody gave tuppence about her while she was alive except to get her knickers off" (402). She was treated as just another dilettante with a scandalous reputation and was prosecuted for "indecent" writings while alive; she died in near obscurity in India and was buried in a nondescript grave. Posthumously, however, she has become a celebrated feminist icon, especially in the United States where multiple library collections are devoted to her work (370). Through her art, it seems she has finally cheated oblivion.

Art similarly immortalises Das. When Anish first saw his father's unsigned portrait of Flora on bookshelves in a store, "[i]t was like seeing a ghost. Not her ghost; his" (447). Even though he had been credited only as "Unknown Indian Artist" (385), this was the first time Das's work had been replicated on such a large scale and Anish is certain his father "would have been quite proud" (386). Das had in a sense anticipated this afterlife even while painting

it, convinced as he was that art alone outlasts the destructive power of time (428). However, the perfect monument to both artists' lives is to be found in his nude Rajput miniature of her.

Stoppard's biographer Hermione Lee observes that the "different portraits of Flora are like ghosts, haunting the play" (2020, 391). After the Modigliani nude is burnt, the pencil sketch by Das is ripped up, the oil painting (earlier believed to be her sole surviving likeness) is revealed as an incomplete work, it is only this intimate watercolour that has truly captured the essence of Flora's whole being that finally survives. On first seeing it, Eleanor exclaims, "Oh heavens! [. . .] *of course.* How like Flora!" When Anish takes her statement to be a compliment to his father's craft, she corrects him, "No . . . I mean, *how like Flora!*" and goes on to contemplate the painting in silence ([1995] 1999, 415)—to Lee, these words mean "how like her to have chosen to be painted thus" (2020, 391). The painting combines the artistic sensibility of both the painter and his subject, and represents the moment of such union. If the "official" oil painting by Das which Pike had splashed on the covers of his book represents Flora's public persona, this miniature watercolour remains the true portrait of her soul—a lasting monument to the fleeting moment when the mysterious poet laid herself bare for art. Other than Flora and Das, only Anish and Eleanor ever get to see the secret portrait.[8]

In the context of the play, the significance of this watercolour cannot be overstated. Nigel Purse, for instance, asserts that "[i]n the symbolism and physical qualities of that small painting can be found the essence of the whole play" (2017, 49). This Rajput-style portrait, it will be shown, serves to represent a time-transcending universal consciousness in the play. Like the voice of Tiresias in *The Waste Land*, the painting combines the consciousness of all the characters involved. The miniature, to begin with, contains within it traces of all time: the past in the form of a book by Emily Eden that echoes Flora's own attitude to the empire, the dramatic present moment after a tussle when Flora offers to pose nude, and foreshadowing of the future as Das has just learnt of her impending death. Anish points out this last detail to an incredulous Mrs. Swan: "Look where this flowering vine sheds its leaves and petals, they are falling to the ground. I think my father knew your sister was dying" ([1995] 1999, 448). The original version of the play even has him confidently declare, "This was painted with love" (1995b, 68), since the painting shows a vine winding around a tree trunk, which Anish interprets as symbolising the consummation of their artistic union. (The real sexual encounter between Flora and Das, in fact, happens *after* the painting is completed and at least in part *because* of it; when she witnesses the miniature for the first time, she is truly moved and inspired by its erotic quality). Even in the contemporary timeline (of the 1980s), it is this painting which drives and completes much of the action: Pike's speculation about it takes him all the way to India, and Eleanor is fully convinced of Anish's claims only after seeing this other, lost portrait.

The immortality that art offers is not just confined to the Western understanding that art outlives its creator. When Flora writes, "perhaps my soul will stay behind as a smudge of paint on paper, as if I'd always been here," she is drawing on the deep spiritual significance of Indian art that she has learnt from Das. As Raghavan explains, "The Indian attitude to life, of which drama [or any other art] is born, considers life as but one act in a long series through which man is gradually evolving towards perfection: death is not the end, nor evil: [sic] realisation and happiness are the real end" (1958, 70). The ultimate goal of art in the Indian context is to offer a "foretaste" of *mokṣa* or liberation of the self from the endless cycle of

rebirths (Hiriyanna 1954, 10). The classical Hindu view considers "art as a form of *yoga*, and identifies aesthetic emotion with that felt when the self perceives the Self," that is, when the individual directly experiences the identity of the self and the Absolute (Coomaraswamy 1918, 19). This quasi-mystical aspect of art can be better understood in the light of *rasa* theory discussed in the play.

Rasa

"What is *rasa*?" Flora asks Das quite simply (Stoppard [1995] 1999, 406), prompting him to explain what has been the central theory in Indian aesthetics for two millennia. "*Rasa* is juice. Its taste. Its essence. A painting must have its *rasa* which is not *in* the painting exactly. *Rasa* is what you must feel when you see a painting, or hear music; it is the emotion which the artist must arouse in you," replies Das (407), beginning one of the most fruitful exchanges between the two artists in the play as they both grapple with their creative blocks. *Rasa,* with its long and complex history, remains notoriously hard to define or translate (Pollock 2016, 19). It can refer to any one of the nine (or more) universal aesthetic emotions deemed fit to be the basis of art; it can also mean aesthetic relish as experienced by the artist-performer and reader-spectator in the portrayal of such emotion. Unlike real world emotions which may give either pleasure or pain to those who experience them, staged or aesthetic emotions—depersonalised and made universal by the skill of the artist—impart unalloyed pleasure alone, irrespective of the subject matter portrayed. A discerning viewer-auditor, known as a *sahṛdaya* (literally, "of similar heart" as the artist), then partakes of this *rasa* by dissociating momentarily from egocentric concerns and attains bliss in identifying with the universalised emotion. Therefore, art itself is understood as a vehicle for transmitting *rasa*.[9] Closely related to *rasa* is the concept of *dhvani,* which B.N. Goswamy defines as the "reverberation of meaning arising from suggestion" (1986, 26). Both *rasa* and *dhvani* play an important role in the composition as well as the reception of all art—and this can be seen illustrated in *Indian Ink* as well.

Das quotes a famous dictum by the fourteenth-century critic Viśvanātha—"Poetry is a sentence whose soul is *rasa*" (Stoppard [1995] 1999, 407). In his treatise *Sāhitya Darpaṇa*, Viśvanātha identifies *rasa* in the process of creation as "the organizing principle which determines the unity and wholeness of the composition" (Honeywell 1969, 166). As for *dhvani*, while he lists out the three kinds of meaning that a poet may use—literal (*abhidhā*), figurative (*lakṣaṇā*), and "suggested" (*vyañjanā*) meanings—he considers the last, the non-paraphrasable, symbolic meaning that works by evocative suggestions as the most important, in that it mirrors the essence of the entire poetic composition—that property which constitutes its excellence (167). By evoking in the mind of an appreciative reader or spectator a complex web of associations, the artist eschews the realism of the particular in favour of the abstracted transpersonal, setting apart the poetic from the mundane world. This explains why Anish insists in the play: "to us Hindus, everything is to be interpreted in the language of symbols" whereas to Eleanor "a vine is only a vine" (Stoppard [1995] 1999, 448).

The significance of *rasa* theory is herein twofold: it guides the practitioner on the creation of art as much as it explains the process of (and ideal conditions for) aesthetic reception by the audience. The difficulty in comprehending *rasa* in its entirety lies in the fact that it is "not an objective entity which exists independently of the experience as the object

experienced; the existence of *rasa* and the experience of *rasa* are identical" (Honeywell 1969, 168). The critic Viśvanātha lists its properties as "pure, indivisible, self-manifested, compounded equally of joy and consciousness, free of admixture with any other perception, the very twin brother of mystic experience (*Brahmāsvādana sahodaraḥ*), and the very life of it is supersensuous (*lokottora*) wonder" (as cited in Coomaraswamy 1918, 35).[10]

The experience of *rasa* merges, if only for a moment, not just 'the dancer and the dance,' but also the viewer and the dance. The joy experienced in such an instant of artistic communion is considered *alaukika* or unworldly.[11] This transcendental bliss is, of course, not universal; it requires a trained eye and ear, or in traditional terms, a "poetic heart" (Hiriyanna 1954, 18). Stoppard echoes this idea in an interview given to Ken Adelman, where he compares the receptivity required of a theatre audience to one's openness to spiritual communion: "[T]heater is an irreplaceable experience. To get that experience, you must bring something to it, which perhaps you don't have to bring to any competing art form. It's like going to church—there's no point to go unless you meet it partway" (2001, 32). Discussing the importance of the *rasa* theory of aesthetic reception in his play with *New York Times* theatre critic Mel Gussow, Stoppard offers the analogy of rock 'n' roll, which undoubtedly "creates an emotion in the listener," but the impact it has on each individual depends on multiple factors, such as one's previous exposure to the genre, awareness of the lore behind each song, or one's own life experiences. Given this variability, he feels that the role of a listener—"the state in which you put yourself into [sic] in order to receive the art"—somehow still remains underappreciated in the West (1995a, 127). The contrast of Anish's response to Flora's oil portrait and Mrs. Swan's description of it as "fairly ghastly, like an Indian cinema poster" reveals the difference between the connoisseur and the philistine (Stoppard [1995] 1999, 379). Seeing him moved to tears by the original painting—"it's so vibrant" (414)—makes Eleanor concede apologetically that, after all, "you need an eye" to appreciate it (415). Flora, however, has the artist's ability as *sahṛdaya* to know a masterpiece when she sees one; she is, as the Rajah of Jummapur observes when he invites her to view his collection of paintings, "a true seeker" (456).

When Flora writes that her soul would stay behind in India as a painting, it is, in fact, the culmination of a long process. Stoppard's originating idea for the play was "a woman having her portrait painted while writing about the painter" (Delaney 1994, 254). He explains he was unaware of the concept of *rasa* when he started researching for *In the Native State.* He admits to stumbling on it quite casually in a bookstore, but it turned out to be a major theme in the play (1995a, 127). Hermione Lee (2020) suggests that the book he consulted may be B.N. Goswamy's *The Essence of Indian Art* (1986). The illustrated volume, issued on the occasion of a major exhibition of Indian paintings and sculpture in San Francisco, USA, had been thematically grouped by the nine *rasas*—an unusual choice at the time since many well-known writings on *rasa* then focussed mainly on the performing arts. Since Stoppard leans heavily on Goswamy's general framework of the nine *rasas* as well as his theoretical explication of Indian paintings, it is interesting to note that Goswamy quotes approvingly Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's idea that "both *rasa* and *dhvani* are essentially metaphysical and vedantic in method and conclusion" (26). Given Stoppard's tendency to exhaustively research the subjects he writes about, it is reasonable to assume that he would have been aware of: (a) the Vedantic idea of Brahman as the Self or Universal Consciousness, (b) the individual self

or *ātman* seeking liberation through union with or the realisation of Brahman, and (c) the role of *rasa* in enabling the connoisseur of art to taste of this divine bliss.

In the play, the ethereal quality of *rasa* is what forms the basis of Flora and Das's cross-cultural relationship. While sitting for her portrait, one day she starts writing a letter to her sister instead of working on her poem. She soon detects a sense of discomfort in Das, who is "frowning at [her] and then at the canvas as if one of [them] is misbehaving" (Stoppard [1995] 1999, 412). When he hesitantly admits that the earlier communion he felt with her was somehow lacking, she confesses that it is her fault: "I am not the same sitter. How thoughtless of me" (413). Their consciousness is united in the *rasa* experience when they both work on their art, even if she is unaware of it.[12] At first glance, this might seem improbable or even irrational. Indeed, if one understood *rasa* as being produced by the act of witnessing a performance or perceiving an art object consciously through one's senses, how would Das feel the difference between Flora's writing a letter rather than a poem without reading either? The explanation lies in viewing the material object or bodily gesture as only a manifestation of something far more pervasive and non-material yet evanescent—their shared consciousness at the moment of creation. In Vedanta, consciousness is regarded as the fundamental reality, while the material aspect of the universe is seen as emerging from it.

Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, who has written extensively on the Vedantic model of consciousness in understanding performing arts, offers the following anecdote to explain the cognition of emotions that are not, strictly speaking, deliberately perceived sensorially:

> American director Peter Sellars made an experiment: actors in one of his productions were on stage and played a scene, as rehearsed, which contained by nature a number of specific emotions. Neither those on-stage actors, nor the audience knew that backstage, a further group of actors were doing a range of exercises intended to allow them to engage deeply with specific emotions. Sellars's idea was that these backstage actors would be radiating emotions. The emotions he instructed them to engage in were either exactly the same emotions portrayed by the actors onstage, or exactly the opposite ones. Both onstage actors and spectators noticed a difference in atmosphere. Actors commented on most successful performances with a special ease of portraying emotions when the backstage group had enforced their emotions, and of a tough and frustrating performance with difficulties of getting into their emotions when the backstage actors had engaged in emotions opposed to theirs (2006, 2).

Meyer-Dinkgräfe then goes on to corroborate the anecdote with his own first-hand experience at a theatre workshop where he sensed a "non-ordinary exchange of information" between the performers, "suggesting a non-ordinary mode of communication" (2006, 3). The play invites the reading that it is a similar exchange that takes place between Das and Flora initially.

Śṛṅgāra: The *Rasa* of Love

The aesthetic emotions or *rasa*s considered fit to be the dominant mood in an artwork were originally eight: the sage Bharata in his *Nāṭyaśāstra* (c. 200 BCE-200 CE) listed *śṛṅgāra, hāsya, karuṇa, raudra, vīra, bhayānaka, bībhatsa,* and *adbhuta* (respectively the erotic, the comic, the pathetic, the furious, the heroic, the fearful, the odious, and the marvellous); tenth century philosopher-critic Abhinavagupta added a ninth *rasa* – *śānta*, the quiescent. As Das

tells Flora in the play, each *rasa* "has its colour . . . its own name and its own god" and they cannot be thrown together at random in any artwork since "some don't get on" well (407). Among these, *śṛṅgāra,* the *rasa* of erotic love, was often held to be greatest.

Interestingly, the dominant *rasa* of Flora's poetry collection *Indian Ink,* of her nude portrait by Das, of the miniature the Rajah gifts her, and ultimately, of Stoppard's play itself, is *śṛṅgāra*. During the rehearsals, when Stoppard felt this aspect was not given sufficient emphasis in the radio version while Flora reads her poem, he told the cast that "the word 'mangrove' is not there entirely accidentally," but "has a gender connotation too" (Delaney 1994, 253). Similarly, when he found an opportunity to revise *Indian Ink* for its 2014 New York revival, he changed the closing speech so as "to not end the play politically, but to end it emotionally and romantically" (Perloff and Stoppard 2015, 9) and to "complete the arc of the beautiful love story between Nirad Das and Flora Crewe" (8). The result, director Carey Perloff suggests, was that the audience "were thrilled to discover" the emotional depths of the work, seeing Stoppard's work for the first time "in such a different key" (12).

Flora's poem on heat ends with a line from Virgil—"*et nos cedamus amori*" ('and we give way to love') (Stoppard [1995] 1999, 470). Even when "practically a virgin," she wrote her first book of poems all about sex, which led her to be tried for indecency in court (441). As Mrs. Swan recalls, "Flora's weakness was always romance" (476). All her encounters with other famous artists like Modigliani and H.G. Wells too had been invariably romantic. Throughout the play, the audience can see that she lives and loves passionately and her art echoes her life. As Stoppard's interviewer Gillian Reynolds notes, practically all the men in the play—Das, Durance, the Resident, the Rajah, Anish, and Pike—come "under her spell . . . They are all in love with Flora and so, I suspect, is Tom Stoppard" (Delaney 1994, 250). Both exuding and evoking *śṛṅgāra,* Flora appears to be an embodiment of the *rasa* itself.

Śṛṅgāra, like all other *rasas*, is produced by combination of the right determinants (*vibhāvas*), consequents (*anubhāvas*), and transitory emotional states (*vyabhichāribhāvas*). It requires, primarily, a lover and his beloved as substantial determinants (*ālambana vibhāva*), alongside external stimulants or excitants (*uddīpana vibhāva*) such as "the moon, sandalwood ointment and other unguents, the humming of bees, attractive clothing and jewelry [sic], an empty house or a secluded grove in a garden appropriate as a trysting place" (Goswamy 1986, 22). Many of these conditions are fulfilled on the day before Flora leaves Jummapur when Das meets her to show his nude miniature of her. The moon has risen; they are alone in Flora's bungalow; as she is wiping her tears, she notices, "Your handkerchief smells faintly of . . . something nice" (Stoppard [1995] 1999, 467). In the radio version of the play, she even adds, "Is it cinnamon?" (1991, 72). Stoppard has said that he intended the mention of *cinnamon* to remind the viewers of *the scent of sandalwood,* which Das had described earlier in the play as one of the stimulants of *śṛṅgāra*. He later gave in to the director's insistence and changed it in the stage version during rehearsal to explicitly mention sandalwood (1995a, 123).

Among the *anubhāvas* (consequents)—"the specific and conventional means of registering emotional states, in particular gestures and glances etc."—Goswamy mentions the "raising of the eyebrows, sidelong glances, embracing, kissing, holding hands" as examples appropriate for *śṛṅgāra* (1986, 22). Although this aspect of the play is not directly captured in the text, Stoppard's interviews indicate how the early stage productions emphasised the love affair through subtle gestures, as will be discussed shortly. As for *vyabhichāribhāvas* pertaining

to *śṛṅgāra*, Goswamy adds that "any complementary emotional state could be brought into a work except cruelty, death, indolence, or disgust," since they would contradict the conditions that produce the erotic sentiment (1986, 23).

In the play, apart from the conducive atmosphere for the emergence of *śṛṅgāra*, there are hints of Flora and Das steadily warming up to each other. Flora has just apologised for misunderstanding Das earlier and shared with him the news that Eleanor is expecting a baby; she is set to leave Jummapur and this may be their last meeting. When a hesitant and nervous Das shows her the Rajput miniature he has painted, she exclaims, "Oh . . . it's the most beautiful thing . . ." and then acknowledges, "This one is for yourself" ([1995] 1999, 469). From the time he was "painting [her] as a gift," only too eager to please her (428), Das has become assertive of his artistic independence and they finally see each other as equals:

> DAS: . . . You are not offended?
> FLORA: No, I'm pleased. It has *rasa*.
> DAS: I think so. Yes. I hope so.
> FLORA: I forget its name.
> DAS: (*pause*) Shringara.
> FLORA: Yes. Shringara. The *rasa* of erotic love. Whose god is Vishnu.
> DAS: Yes.
> FLORA: Whose colour is blue-black.
> DAS: Shyama. Yes.
> FLORA: It seemed a strange colour for love.
> DAS: Krishna was often painted shyama.
> FLORA: Yes. I can see that now. It's the colour he looked in the moonlight.
> *They stand still, and in the moment the moonlight clouds to darkness.* (469-70)

From a darkened stage, Flora's recorded voice alone is heard reading out the closing lines of her poem about heat.

Stoppard recalls his repeated arguments with long-time collaborator Peter Wood, who directed *Indian Ink* in its premiere, against making things explicit. However, it is clear from the staging that Das spends the night with her, since she wakes up draped in his shawl the next morning (1995a, 122).[13] Durance also sees Das at dawn right outside Flora's bungalow and later finds her awake in her room by an "*unmade bed*" (Stoppard [1995] 1999, 473).

Though Mrs. Swan mentions that Flora "used [men] like batteries," replacing them whenever "things went flat," her relationship with Das is markedly different (476). Unlike earlier lovers, he treats her with unwonted kindness, grace, and respect for her as an artist. In fact, he is rather offended by Flora's innuendo-laden banter in one of their early meetings and is as such attracted to her primarily as a fellow artist.[14] It is their silent shared communion in the *rasa* experience, beginning when they create art together, and reaching its summit when they look at the watercolour miniature by Das together, that leads to a deep appreciation of each other's art culminating in their sexual union—and this extraordinary affair restores her creative powers. When she writes, "The juices are starting to flow again" (453), she may be reaching for more than just a casual double entendre linking her sexuality and poetic gifts; after all, Flora has experienced first-hand the aesthetic rapture of *rasa,* the "juice" or essence of all creative activity—whether human or divine.

Transcendence through Love

Among all the rasas, *śṛṅgāra* was often hailed as *rasarāja* or the king of *rasas* since its sublime portrayal could transcend the physical act of sex to signify the union of the individual *ātman* (self) with the universal Brahman (Self). The Rajah of Jummapur, in fact, mentions that in India, "erotic art has a long history and a most serious purpose," although he does not elaborate on it (Stoppard [1995] 1999, 457). T. Balasaraswati, one of the greatest exponents of the classical dance Bharatanatyam in the last century, asserts that "Sringara stands supreme. . . . No other emotion is capable of better reflecting the mystic union of the human with the divine" (1984, 10). The parallel between the erotic and the spiritual in India, in fact, dates back to at least the Upanishadic period, as Ananda K. Coomaraswamy observes: "in the *Bṛihadāraṇyaka Upanishad*, the bliss of atman-intuition, or the intuition of the Self, is compared with the happiness of earthly lovers in self-forgetting dalliance" (1918, 19).

Flora learns from Das that the presiding deity of *śṛṅgāra* is Viṣṇu, who, in his avatar as Kṛṣṇa, was painted *śyāma* or blue-black, decorated in silks and peacock plumes. He was a favourite "of the old Rajasthani painters," Das tells her, and his "great love affair" with Rādhā as described in Jayadeva's 12th century poem *Gita Govinda* had inspired several paintings (405).[15] Although married to another man, Rādhā became idealised as the divine consort due to her boundless love and devotion to Kṛṣṇa—a metaphor for the individual soul's longing to be reunited with the Absolute despite being tied to earthly duties (Kinsley 1988, 84–85). Thus, Rādhā symbolises the transcendence of the individual self through love—the theme also of *rās līla*, Lord Kṛṣṇa's divine dance with the *gopis*.[16]

Susan L. Schwartz draws an interesting parallel between the *rasa* experience, which has its philosophical basis in Advaitic (non-dualist) belief, and the still-extant devotional performance of *rās līla,* involving singing and dancing in circles associated with the ecstatic worship of Kṛṣṇa, which follows a theistic and dualist tradition. Though *rasa* and *rās* are

> completely different words that refer to different forms of expressive action . . . they share the larger sensibility that pervades performance in the complex of cultures that have informed India's traditions. Performance, in both cases, offers the possibility of presence and transcendence, a path through bodily experience toward ultimate and religiously defined transformation, whether that is understood as ecstatic worldly union with a deity (raasa) or a taste (rasa) of liberation from the maya of existence. (Schwartz 2004, 20)

Despite the considerable doctrinal differences between the two traditions, they both treat the act of performance as a powerful means to transcend the narrow confines of one's own ego. Surrender to the Absolute (seen as Kṛṣṇa) necessitates, at least temporarily, the dissolution of personality. The devotee, describes Kinsley, "is required, as is the aesthetic connoisseur, to lose himself in the mood of the drama, to resist involving his own personal desires and emotions. Before he can soar to the heights of all-consuming love for Krishna he must forget himself, disassociate himself from those particular circumstances and feelings that make him unique" (as cited in Schwartz 2004, 19–20). Thus, it is seen how these different performance traditions are strongly influenced by the Vedantic ideal of attaining eternal bliss, either by the realisation of or union with Brahman.

How might this insight inform a reading of Stoppard's play? *Indian Ink* traces the spiritual progress of Flora, who, at the beginning of the play, tells her host Coomaraswami, "I'm afraid I'm without religion . . ." In her first dispatch to her sister at the same time, she announces, "I'm going to like India" ([1995] 1999, 372). At the beginning, the conversation between Flora and Das is awkward and halting, inhibited as they are by an artificial sense of modesty and their respective positions as an authoritative *memsahib* and a colonial subject. Once she learns of *rasa* from Das she is seized by the idea, intuitively finding in it a new means to explore her creative self. She might lack the words to define *rasa*, but is able to recognise it while Das paints her. When she sheds her clothes—symbolically all that ties her down to a specific time and place—she realises that the intimate and vulnerable moment of being nude would offer Das a true reflection of herself as an artist.

Until then she had complained that Das was not seeing deeply enough *into* her soul to portray her accurately in the painting and was only mimicking the Pre-Raphaelites. Having seen the Rajah's private collection of paintings, she knows how Rajasthani erotic art could portray *śṛṅgāra* in all its sublimity and intuits that posing nude would help Das acknowledge and reproduce her sensuality in the painting. Later, as she listens to the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa legend, she asks Das, "Were Krishna and Radha punished in the story?" to which he casually responds, "What for?" Struck by the contrast between her own puritanical culture that prosecuted her for her writings and the freedom in India, she declares, "I should have come here years ago" (430). Finally, after she sees her Rajput miniature by Das and following the consummation of her love affair, she likens herself to Rādhā, who experienced the bliss of union with the Lord through love, and whose ecstasy is eternised in *rasa*-laden Rajasthani art.

Flora's cryptic closing statement in her last letter to her sister deserves some attention: "I feel fit as two lops this morning, and happy, too, because something good happened here . . . perhaps my soul will stay behind as a smudge of paint on paper, as if I'd always been here, like Radha who was the most beautiful of the herdswomen, undressed for love in an empty house" (480). It is the last time her voice is heard live on stage, and in the same scene, young Eleanor is seen visiting Flora's grave. Despite knowing that she is dying, Flora feels happy and hopeful about the restoration of her creative powers. The true portrait of her soul Das has painted shows her as a European feeling at home in India, "as if I'd always been here." Though she has often had casual sex before, she has truly found love in India, perhaps for the first time. Above all, she has, at least momentarily, tasted immortality just before her physical death by partaking of *rasa*. Flora thus experiences a foretaste of the Self.

All the characters in the play remain bound by realistic convention since they interact only with others from their own time and space. In one instance within the text, however, Stoppard deliberately plays with the rule: when Flora seems to tell a bleating Pike, who has been going on and on with his irrelevant footnotes, "Oh, shut up!" It is only a theatrical sleight-of-hand, of course, as it is turns out she and Das are just chasing away some "*unseen pi-dogs*," but it is telling that Pike too leaves the stage, as if rebuked, as the dogs "*go whining into oblivion*" (413). Flora, the "true seeker," therefore appears to the audience to be able to cut across time and consciousness.

One of the chief goals of life according to different schools of Vedantic thought is the realisation of oneness leading to dissolution of the subject-object divide. In the context of the play, Flora's portrait, with its associated rasa, becomes a stand-in for Universal consciousness in which all differences are resolved. The watercolour embodies the synthesis of all elements

thought to be polar opposites: Hindu symbolism and Muslim realism; European subject matter and Indian setting; day and night; inside and outside; the erotic and the spiritual; and ultimately, the seer and the seen. It is important to note that the painting is never directly shown but only described to the audience, as the experience of Self can be communicated only indirectly to the unrealised. Just like the artistic synthesis represented in Flora's miniature portrait and the confluence of world religions that grew into Theosophy, India is itself "a palimpsest culture that never throws anything away but takes every new influence or import and throws it into the mix" (Iyer 1999, 28). Stoppard's stagecraft succeeds in reproducing in the theatre the oceanic spirit of this nation.

Notes

1. Unless specifically noted otherwise, all page references are to the 1999 edition of the play in *Plays Five*.
2. In his play, Stoppard uses the commonly Anglicised phonetic respellings of technical terms in Sanskrit, thereby rendering "*śṛṅgāra*" as "*shringara*" and names like Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa as Radha and Krishna. While this certainly aids readability, it does not accurately reproduce the pronunciation of certain sounds. In this paper, the standard transliteration of Sanskrit (IAST) is used throughout except in direct quotes where an alternate spelling is reproduced as found in the source.
3. By Stoppard's own account, *Indian Ink* began with his wish to examine "the ethos of empire" but it turned out "much more an intimate play than a polemical play" (1995a, 102). In fact, he even felt the play to be "worryingly cosy sometimes" but was pleased it had "no villains" and no room for any "radical fierceness" (124–25). In 2018, he admitted that when he wrote the play he had a rather positive view of the British Raj. However, his later reading—for instance, Shashi Tharoor's *An Era of Darkness*—revealed a very different picture of the British atrocities in India and he speculated that, were he to write it then (in 2018), taking stock of all this new information, it would be quite a different play (Stoppard and Kapoor 2018, 4:13-6:45).
4. Das is almost certainly named after Nirad C. Chaudhury, author of the infamous *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian,* which Stoppard read as part of his research (Stoppard 1995a, 125). The President of the Theosophical Society Coomaraswami may derive his name (and peculiar spelling) from the illustrious Indian art historian and philosopher of the early 1900s, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy.
5. The fundamental belief of the Theosophical Society, according to its founder Helena Blavatsky, is that "the *root* of all nature, objective and subjective, and everything else in the universe, visible and invisible, *is, was*, and *ever will be* one absolute essence, from which all starts, and into which everything returns" (1890, 43). This belief is closely aligned with the Universal Consciousness or Brahman, as conceived in Vedantic philosophy. It may be worth noting that Blavatsky lived for about six years in India, and the Society placed its international headquarters in Adyar, Madras (now Chennai).
6. This statement, taken from Aitareya Upanishad 3.3, can be rendered variously as "Brahman is Intelligence," "Insight is the Absolute," "The Ultimate Reality is Wisdom," "Brahman is Awareness," and so on, depending on the interpretation of *pra-jñāna*, which suggests Supreme Knowledge. Patrick Olivelle translates it as "Brahman is knowing" (1996, 199). However, Brahman is here equated with Consciousness, and so this version is preferred.

7. Advaita, perhaps the best known branch of Hindu thought in the West, is only one among the many schools of Vedantic philosophy. Though Advaita is non-dualistic, affirming the undifferentiated identity of the individual self (*ātman*) with the universal Self (*Brahman*), there are other schools such as Viśiṣṭādvaita (qualified monism), Dvaita (dualism), and Bhedābheda (identity-in-difference). While Advaita posits that the knowledge (*jñana*) of the impersonal Brahman is the path to liberation, other theistic schools of Vedanta often identify Brahman with the personal god Viṣṇu and insist that love and devotion to the Lord (*bhakti*) are the means to liberation from the cycle of rebirths. While Stoppard's play here explicitly invokes the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa legend (belonging to the dualist tradition), it is also possible to see an Advaitic conception of Consciousness as the ultimate reality in his other works.

8. Even earlier, Eleanor had kept from Pike an eighteenth-century watercolour gifted by the Rajah of Jummapur to Flora. An erotic painting taken from his collection depicting scenes from the *Gita Govinda* was, she thought, too intimate a gift to be shared with the greedy and inquisitive Pike. Handing over the painting to Anish, she says, in the original edition of the play, "I didn't tell Eldon. He's not family" (1995b, 66).

9. Despite minor inaccuracies, Wallace Dace (1963) provides a highly accessible and concise introduction to the basics of the *rasa* theory, especially for the Western reader; for a short yet comprehensive primer on *rasa*, see Chari (1976). As a sourcebook on historical development of the theory, Sheldon Pollock's *A Rasa Reader* (2016) remains invaluable.

10. Honeywell offers a detailed explanation of each of these properties (1969, 169–71), except for the idea of "the very twin brother of mystic experience (*Brahmāsvādana sahodaraḥ*)," which will be discussed further in this essay.

11. In the long history of its evolution, *rasa* theory has been the subject of many lively debates among scholars and theoreticians. One of the paradoxes in this theory is that the experience of *rasa* is occasioned by the viewing of a performance which involves physical actions, i.e., a group of actors producing a certain set of gestures with their bodies, and yet the experience itself transcends the material world and is called *alaukika*. However, these seemingly opposed (material and nonmaterial) aspects are not irreconcilable: the very spiritual basis of *rasa* is that it enables the experience of oneness—a state that transcends all differences. According to the tenth century philosopher Abhinavagupta, through the *rasa* experience, the spectator is able to transcend the limitations of one's ego and experience oneness with the Absolute. The uncanniness of *rasa* also emerges from the simultaneous experience of distance and identification. The performer stands apart, as a performer, so as not to get lost in the character; yet, she is also a witness to the performance through the tasting of which she experiences oneness. This has been corroborated by many practitioners in their interviews and is not merely a theoretical speculation. For instance, D. Appukuttan Nair describes the philosophy of Kathakali thus: "The dualistic realm of art is not pleasing to a philosopher appreciator. The supreme *sahrdayan* [sic] seeks the nondualistic variety of art, where the artiste, the art-form, and the connoisseur become one" (as cited in Schwartz, 2004, 60). This understanding of art can be extended to human consciousness, which is produced by or arises from material means, but quickly transcends the conditions that enable it to be manifest. As I argue elsewhere, this seems to be Stoppard's conception of consciousness too.

12. Even earlier, at a time when Flora was struggling with her poem since the "emotion won't harmonize," Das too had confided, "My painting has no *rasa* today" (406). In fact, this is the beginning of their exchange on *rasa*.

13. According to Stoppard, Wood was "a rasa man," and so were lighting designer Mark Henderson and scenic designer Carl Toms. He recalls how the team coordinated the music, lights, and design to make the stage look "like a beautiful painting. There's a lot of rasa in those things" (1995a, 124).
14. Russell shows how Stoppard inverts the usual colonial and gendered gaze of the Raj genre where Indian men are seen as libidinous and English women as requiring protection from the untamed sexuality of the natives: "If the key episode of E.M. Forster's *Passage to India* is Adela Quested's experience in the Marabar Caves and the resulting white English outrage over her supposed rape, and if the central image of Paul Scott's *The Raj Quartet* is a white English girl running in the dark from an alleged sexual assault by an Indian man, the primary image of *Indian Ink* is of a forward, white Englishwoman posing for an embarrassed Indian painter, Nirad Das" (2004, 3).
15. Rādhā, the favoured companion of Lord Kṛṣṇa in his youth, is the central figure in *Gitagovinda*. The theme of the poem is the agony of love-in-separation and all the risks she runs in order to be with Kṛṣṇa, whom she passionately loves. Prior to this poem, Rādhā appears to have been a minor figure in the lore of Kṛṣṇa, but she assumes greater significance with the growth of the *bhakti* movement. An earlier tradition details the ways in which the *gopis* (cowherd women) of the Vraja village are irresistibly attracted by the charm and beauty of Kṛṣṇa and abandon their household duties in order to spend their days and nights in his company. David Kinsley suggests that Rādhā "inherits this role in the later devotional movements, particularly in Bengal" (1988, 85). Rādhā is often worshipped along with Kṛṣṇa, and in some sects, even treated as the cosmic queen "equal to or superior to Krishna" (93). Sectarian differences also exist in beliefs about whether Rādhā was married to another man while she met her lover Kṛṣṇa in secret. Although some sects claim that Rādhā belonged only to Kṛṣṇa, Kinsley argues that, in the most commonly accepted version of the legend, Rādhā's love was openly acknowledged to be an adulterous affair (90).
16. The legend of Kṛṣṇa's amorous sport in which he multiplied his form so that each *gopi* could have her own Kṛṣṇa gave rise to the folk performance tradition of *rās līla,* which continues to this day, predominantly in parts of Northern India. It is outside the scope of the present paper to elaborate on this longstanding tradition and its religious significance. However, it may be noted that this type of performance emerged through the *bhakti* movement (originating first in South India and spreading to the North around 10th century CE). According to Susan L. Schwartz (2004), the *bhakti* rasa that participants of these performances (seek to) experience has its origin in "the love and longing associated with *shringara* rasa" but is directed at achieving "an impersonal state of heightened awareness, building toward the ultimate goal of transformation" (19); the ecstatic fervour of the performance "provides a bodily experience of a transcendent reality" (20).

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