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## **Aesthetics and Politics across Cultures in Tom Stoppard's *Indian Ink***

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### **Abstract**

The paper reflects upon cross cultural perspective as an artistic manoeuvre in *Indian Ink* for a better understanding of the relationship between India and British in both its colonial and post-colonial scenario depicting through a series of aesthetic interchanges between Flora and Nirad Das in 1930 and between Flora's sister Mrs. Swann and Nirad's son Anish in the present that also includes Eldon Pike, an American scholar and editor of Flora's *Collected Letters*. Stoppard's own juxtaposition of the two time periods and the characters signifies and helps to deconstruct the static notion of national identity. Their discussion of artistic creations in both cultures in painting or poetry makes a different approach to understand their art that combines English storytelling and Indian symbolism.

**Keywords**

Aesthetics; Art; Politics; Cross Cultural Perspective; Tom Stoppard; *Indian Ink*.

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The paper intends to explore how the cultural encounter between two generations in the play leads to a better understanding of the relationship between art and artist in its both colonial and post-colonial scenario. The play depicts a series of aesthetic interchanges between the young British poetess Flora and the painter Nirad Das in 1930 and Flora's sister Mrs. Swann and Nirad's son Anish Das in the present time that also includes Eldon Pike, the American scholar and editor of Flora's *Collected Letters*. Stoppard's own juxtaposition of the two time periods and two set of characters reflect his skilled staging that signifies and more radically develops to deconstruct the static notion of national identity to understand and for a better perception of the works of art across cultures.

The attempt to rediscover the past and the nature of Flora's relationship with Nirad Das while her visit to Jummapur in 1930 opens a cultural corridor between the descendents of these particular characters. The artistic urge behind Flora's composition of two poems about India and Nirad's several paintings of her reveals their mutual understanding and enthusiasm that ultimately establishes a strange but positive relationship between the two despite their territorial and cultural differences. And this cultural transmission is possible through a discourse in which all the characters participate and use various parameters to interpret the works of art that reflects the tendency of cultural multiplicity to understand the multiple layers within the works of art.

The play opens with the letter Flora writing to her sister Nell about her arrival at Jummapur where she was cordially welcomed by Coomeraswami, the President of Theosophical Society in India. She adjusts herself very easily in a completely new environment surrounded by so many Indians whom she feels so kind and friendly to her. She notices the typical Indian setting of the guest house she stays in – called dak-bungalow and her sense of humour comes out

prominently while she describes how she misunderstood and confuses the typical Indian word 'dak' that means 'post' with the English word 'duck' that she never found in the guest house. The scene takes the present time with a discussion between Mrs. Swann and Eldon Pike about the *Collected Letters* of Flora that Pike has edited and published with several foot notes. He also wishes to write a biography on the poetess Flora and discusses with Mrs. Swann the relevance and importance to write a biography of an artist for the better understanding of his or her works. And Mrs. Swann in a typical Stoppardian manner comments that biography is the worst possible excuse for getting people wrong. Flora's lecture goes very well to get a lot of praises and she was interviewed to share her friendship with the famous novelist H. G. Wells and her opinions about some of his great characters.

And the most important incident that changes Flora's life while she stays in Jummapur, is her meeting with Nirad Das which she describes "then I met my painter" as if it is going to be the turning point in her life. It is throughout the discussion with Nirad Das about so many things like his fascination of British poets, painters and novelists and their life style, the works of Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and then the concept of *rasa* to understand the crux of Indian aesthetics. When Flora comes to know about Nirad's overwhelming fascination of British culture and art through his interest and knowledge of some British artists where they lived in London, which part of England is reflected in their painting or novels she was greatly amazed by his uncontrolled enthusiasm to a culture which he has learnt from books. He succeeds to win the confidence of Flora that his Indianness is not a hindrance to adopt the British culture which is no more alien to him rather he presents himself as if he gets mastery in English like his native culture. But Flora strongly reacts and objects to Nirad's over enthusiasm in English tradition of art and culture and advises him to be more subservient to his native roots. She requests Nirad to treat her in the same way if she would be an Indian, not a British. But Nirad explains her wish to be a mental construction that has no counterpart in the material world.

The understanding of culture reaches its climax when they choose the concept of *rasa* as a subject matter of their discussion that explains more significantly their works of art - be it her poems about heat or his paintings of oil and watercolour. The first question Flora asks “What is *rasa*?” Das introduces the concept of *rasa* as the “emotion which the artist must arouse in you.” Flora wants to know again whether a poem does have *rasa* and Nirad’s reply is “Poetry is a sentence whose soul is *rasa*.” Nirad explains the nine *rasas* associated with nine different colours that convey particular moods. Das opines that the *rasa* of Flora’s poem might be anger as her poem is about heat. But Flora explicitly informs that her poem about heat symbolizes sex which Das explains her that the *rasa* of erotic love is called ‘*shringara*’. Its god is Vishnu and its colour is *shyama* which is blue-black. This *shringara* requires a lover and his beloved and it is aroused by, for example, the moon, the sandalwood or being in an empty house. The reference of Radha described as the most beautiful herdswomen suits here to understand *shringara* and very aptly gives hint to Flora’s predicaments in future for which she compares herself with Radha.

The discussion about *rasa* in the play also achieves its significance to understand the artistic impulse of both Flora’s poems and the portraits of Flora by the painter Nirad Das. When Nirad’s son Anish later visits the house of Mrs. Swann and sees a miniature painting he immediately recognises it to be a work by his father while going through its symbolism. He interprets it to be a house-within-house structure while Mrs Swann judges it to be just a book on bed covered by a mosquito net. Anish sees a vine with falling leaves as evidence that his father knew that she was dying. Eleanor says sometimes a vine is only a vine. The multiple interpretations while looking at the same painting describes the freeplay of several patterns that varies across cultures but has enough significance to understand both the poetics and politics of a particular culture.

In Jummapur, Flora’s meeting with some other persons who deliberately attempted to flirt with her - the British agent Durance who keeps his eyes whatever happens in Jummapur pursues her and the Raja who becomes too

frank to flatter her in his first meeting and offers her a gift disclosing openly that he knows she has come to Jummapur for her health problems - serves as a direct contrast with Nirad Das in understanding Flora and her poetic sensibility. Through this contrast in treatment with Flora the true nature of the relationship between the two artists is hinted very significantly. The artistic interaction between the British poetess and the Indian painter leaves a space and thereby brings the cultural reconciliation that positively helps to develop a strong relationship between cultures. The apparent conflicts and contrasts between the two cultures are never overlooked, rather by taking them into account to deal with more sensibly, it strengthens the bond and makes it more artistic and more humane to be distinguished from the mundane realities.

The play artistically articulates cultural exchange that problematizes the static notion of one's national identity by interrogating the cultural boundary that one claims to belong. It takes into account how the cultural background of an artist is going to be relevant in understanding the tenets of his art. And it always comes in conflict to decide the role of cultural attributes in artistic sensibilities. Anish claims that England is his home now because he has spent half of his life here. And more important is he has married here with an English girl met in art school but not still his model because the nature of his painting is now changed into deconstructive. The irony here lies in the fact while Flora acts as his father's model in the past but could not materialise their relationship in concrete terms the girl started as the model of Anish later becomes his wife and he claims himself to be more British.

Throughout the play understanding human values within various cultures is more important to understand and interpret the works of art. But it would not be possible unless it is artistically executed through the aesthetic interaction that inclusively considers and analyses the various problems that arise in this process of cultural transmit. It is the enthusiastic approach that the characters take to introduce and continue a healthy discussion that brings arts, politics, culture and some other serious issues into focus to have a better unified

perception of the world that consists of various apparent differences but can be tuned in the realms of artistic endeavour. At those levels of aesthetic intuition that precedes logic, thought and language – at those odd points where art like love creates a bridge and unites the two souls together and thereby establishes the triumph of human values despite their geographical and cultural differences.

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