

## **Between Realism and Reflexivity: Interrogating Theatrical Form in *Bruised Evenings* and *Journey with the Body of Time***

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the interplay between realism and reflexivity in two of Abhi Subedi's plays, *Bruised Evenings* and *Journey with the Body of Time*. The study, through a metatheatrical reading, investigates how Subedi deviates from traditional theatrical forms. It also analyzes embedding self-referential devices, symbolic layering, character fragmentation, and ruptures within realist narrative structures. Drawing on Richard Hornby's taxonomy of metadrama and critical perspectives from Lionel Abel, Patrice Pavis, and Ching-jung Chiu, the article analyzes how these plays engage in a dynamic dialogue with theatre itself to transform performance into both form and content. Despite being based on socio-political and cultural concerns, Subedi's dramaturgy transcends conventional narrative boundaries and fuses ritual, myth, memory, and performativity in reflexive style. The paper concludes that Subedi's strategic use of metatheatre rejects realism and at the same time creatively redefines it. Such use of technique also opens up new aesthetic and philosophical possibilities for Nepali theatre. This study is also expected to contribute to a broader understanding of theatrical innovation in South Asian drama and invites further scholarly engagement with Nepali plays as fertile area of artistic experimentation and expression.

*Keywords:* Nepali drama, realism, Abhi Subedi, experimental theatre, metatheatre

## Introduction

Theatre in Nepal has historically reflected its cultural, philosophical, and political landscapes. While earlier dramatic traditions were rooted in Sanskrit, Maithili, and ritualistic performances, the modern Nepali theatre movement began to take different shape in the post-Rana era. This growth further advanced in the 20th century with massive exposure to Western theatrical forms and global experimental trends. Subedi, amidst this transition, has emerged as one of the most compelling literary voices whose plays amalgamate realism and metatheatrical experimentation. Bruised *Evenings* and *Journey with the Body of Time* are the example for the bold theatrical experiments. These plays challenge the conventions of representational realism and engage in what Abel (1963) called metatheatre. It is a mode of performance in which the play draws attention to its own nature as theatre. The mode often questions fixed character identities, destabilize linear temporality, and foreground the act of performance itself.

*Bruised Evenings* (Subedi, 2006) portrays a symbolic confrontation between myth and memory where a traditional festival collapses into existential reflection. The integration of a puppet show as a play-within-the-play adds another performative layer. Similarly, *Journey with the Body of Time* (Subedi, 2012) is a monodrama. It meditates on memory, aging, and the performative nature of selfhood. Its non-linear progression, choreographic sequences, and frequent interruptions transform the narrative into a reflective theatrical event. These techniques relate to Hornby's (1986) theory of metadrama, particularly his five-part taxonomy: play-within-the-play, ceremony within the play, role-playing within roles, literary and real-life references, and self-reference. He suggests that metadrama arises whenever the subject of a play is, to a large extent, theatre itself. Subedi's

dramaturgy employs this mode to engage the audience in an interpretive process where the form becomes as important as theme.

The theatrical self-reflexivity is not unique to the Asian theatrical landscape. The South Asian dramatists such as Karnad (1971), Sircar (1978), and Dattani (1998) have long been employing non-linear narratives and self-referential devices to challenge realist theatre. Karnad's *Hayavadana* (1971), for instance, juxtaposes folk narratives with Brechtian estrangement to explore identity and hybridity. Whereas Sircar's *Evam Indrajit* (1974) dismantles conventional narrative structure to reflect existential absurdity, Dattani's *Final Solutions* (1998) uses stage layering and split character identities. These dramatists collectively illustrate how South Asian drama has embraced theatrical experimentation as a tool for aesthetic renewal and socio-political critique. However, Nepali theatre has been slower to move beyond the comfort zone of realism and didacticism. Much of its contemporary production remains confined to moral allegory, issue-based drama or straightforward political critique. In this context, Subedi's use of metatheatre marks a crucial departure as his plays question the relationship between theatre and life. They also raise epistemological questions about truth, memory, identity, and representation. Despite the innovative scope of such experimental plays, Subedi's metatheatrical strategies are found to have received little critical attention. In other words, existing scholarship on his work often centers on thematic analysis or poetic language with less focus on his formal approach. Thus, this article is a creative response to the very lack.

## **Metadrama in the Context of Nepali Theatre**

The history of Nepali theatre is deeply intertwined with the nation's cultural, political, and literary evolution. Traditional performance forms such as *Balan*, *Tamang Selo*, and *Gaine Geet* served as early vehicles for storytelling and ritual enactment. Although these oral and performative forms were theatrical in spirit, modern scripted drama only began to develop meaningfully in the early 20th century, particularly after the fall of the Rana regime in 1951.

The post-Rana period witnessed a new cultural awakening and the emergence of Bal Krishna Sama (1903–1981) who is regarded as the father of modern Nepali drama. Sama's plays were influenced by both the Western classics and Sanskrit poetics. His works as *Mukunda Indira* and *Prem Pinda* emphasized psychological realism and social reform (Subedi, 2006). His work also introduced the proscenium stage to a wider audience and helped establish a new literary culture of playwriting. However, realism remained dominant even in Sama's more symbolic works where experiment-based dramaturgy was virtually absent. On top of it, theatrical development in Nepal remained largely thematic and socially didactic throughout the Panchayat era (1960–1990), during which era the state closely monitored artistic production. Most plays from this period focused on moral instruction, nationalism, caste, and gender issues (Upadhyay, 2000). In this context, the dramatic form was expected to convey a clear message with minimal room for ambiguity or structural innovation.

One reason for this delayed development is the lack of institutional infrastructure and theoretical discourse in Nepal's theatre scene. Until the 1990s, there were very few permanent theatre houses or formal training programs. The few existing dramatists primarily focused on realism, naturalism, and didactic narratives. While theatre groups

such as Aarohan-Gurukul, established in 1982, introduced *Stanislavskian* training and exposure to international drama (Subedi, 2009), the exploration of form-based experimentation remained limited.

Abhi Subedi is among the first playwrights in Nepal to deliberately embrace metatheatricality as a rhetorical and aesthetic strategy. A scholar, poet, and dramatist with a deep engagement in literary theory, Subedi moves beyond thematic commentary to interrogate the very mechanics of theatre. His plays, such as *Bruised Evenings* and *Journey with the Body of Time*, question the boundary between art and reality, actor and character, story and performance. His plays give voice to marginalized groups, especially women and ordinary people who are often excluded from mainstream literary representation (Mishra, 2020). He blends cultural elements such as rituals, religion, and myths with experimental techniques such as metatheatre and postmodern aesthetics (Rijal, 2004). Subedi's incorporation of postmodern Western styles into Nepali drama marks a significant shift in both theatrical form and content. His characters often gain self-awareness when faced with life's harsh realities; they also reflect a deeper philosophical engagement with existence (Vatsyayan, 2005).

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks**

Metatheatre, a form of drama that self-consciously reflects on its own structure and performance, provides a unique lens through which to examine the interplay between illusion and reality in plays. This research adopts a metatheatrical reading as its central methodology and focuses primarily on the theoretical frameworks developed by Lionel Abel, Patrice Pavis, Richard Hornby, and Ching-jung Chiu, among others. It also draws on secondary literary criticism and textual analysis. The aim is to analyze how Subedi's use of metatheatre offers a formal and

philosophical response to both realistic tradition and political theatre in Nepal.

Abel (1963) coined the term *metatheatre* and defined it as a genre in which characters recognize their roles within a theatrical world. For Abel, metatheatre reflects a vision of life that is inherently dramatic, where the line between performance and lived experience is porous. According to him, “all metaplays are theatre pieces about life seen already theatricalized” (p. 61). His understanding suggests that plays using this technique do not aim for illusionistic realism; they intentionally draw attention to their own construct and expose the mechanisms of theatre.

Similarly, Hornby (1986) in his influential book *Drama, Metadrama and Perception* identifies five common forms of metadrama: play within the play, ceremony within the play, role-playing within the role, reference to reality or literature, and self-reference. He provides a concise and form-oriented analysis of the genre explaining:

Metadrama can be defined as drama about drama; it occurs whenever the subject of a play turns out to be, in some sense, drama itself. There are many ways in which this can occur. All drama is metadramatic, since its subject is always, willy-nilly, the drama/culture complex. A playwright is constantly drawing on their knowledge of drama as a whole (and, ultimately, culture as a whole) as their “vocabulary” or subject matter (p. 19).

Hornby’s taxonomy becomes particularly relevant for analyzing Subedi’s plays which often incorporate ritual performance, symbolic layering, and overt self-reference. Both *Bruised Evenings* and *Journey with the Body of Time* present ceremonies, role overlaps, and narrative fragmentation that force the audience to question theatrical norms.

Similarly, Pavis (1987) adds another important layer to this theoretical approach. He emphasizes that metatheatres does not require an embedded play within the play; it can exist wherever the performance reflects upon its own theatricality:

All that is required is that the represented reality appears to be one that is already theatrical, as in plays in which the main theme is life as theatre. Metatheatres, thus defined, becomes a form of anti-theatre, where the dividing line between play and real life is erased (p. 210).

Pavis argues that metatheatres shows a fictional illusion that self-consciously reflects upon itself. In order to reveal the artificiality and illusory nature of life, this dramatic form breaks the boundaries of realism. Therefore, metatheatres is a quality that diminishes the idea of theatre as a mere mirror of reality. It brings forth the theatricality of life.

Another critic Ching-jung Chiu (2000) writes, “Technically, any play which has as its subject other play(s) or drama in general, or which attempts to describe and analyze dramatic practice and theatrical connections and to establish ‘poetics’ for this particular genre qualifies as metadrama” (pp. 2–3). Chiu emphasizes that when drama takes drama itself as its subject matter, metadrama occurs with the purpose of establishing its own poetics.

Thus, this paper outlines the theoretical foundation that frames the reading of Subedi’s plays. By drawing from both foundational theorists and modern metatheatrical critics, the study aims to show how metadrama in Subedi’s *Bruised Evenings* (2006) and *Journey with the Body of Time* (2012) functions as a sophisticated narrative device to challenge the audience’s assumptions about realism, character, and truth.

### **Self-Reflexive Theatricality in *Bruised Evenings* and *Journey with the Body of Time***

*Bruised Evenings* and *Journey with the Body of Time* represent experimental features of theatrical techniques. The plays portray drama in its purest and most straightforward form as well as multiple levels of metadrama. Both plays reflect reality through the playwright's metatheatrical awareness, which fills the plays with abundant metatheatrical elements that interest the present researchers. Furthermore, such dramaturgy elevates modern Nepalese theatre to new heights in terms of experimentation. The plays make extensive use of metadrama and largely revolve around forms such as depiction of depictions, dramas of drama, and especially in *Bruised Evenings*, roles within roles.

While *Bruised Evenings* reflects the gods-human conflict, issues of class consciousness, and humanity's celebration of triumph through various cultural activities and jatras, *Journey with the Body of Time* is a monoplay that recognizes and celebrates the beauty of the body in performance. "*Bruised Evenings* is a political play based on culture that speaks of our hard time through myths" (p. 9). Having been chained in a maze of different rulers, whether religious or political, people have frequently suffered. On the other hand, *Journey with the Body of Time* covers the life of the character Body-hero, tracing his experiences from birth to death. The protagonist has mixed feelings about his life journey who has lived through a time of violence that has bruised him. This period represents the conflict and political upheavals of Nepal.

Firstly, we analyze the plays in connection with Hornby's *play within the play* categorization. When drama has drama itself as its subject matter, metadrama takes place within the play. This device also establishes poetic layers



and involves various forms of performance. In other words, a *play within the play* that describes and analyzes theatrical practice and connections is considered metadrama. Moreover, it is a layering technique that allows for introspection. The inward movement of metadrama and the examination of drama itself allow for multiple levels and layers of reflection.

R. J. Nelson, in *Play within the Play*, is significantly less restrictive about who or what defines whether a play is a play within a play. He states,

Who defines the innerness of the play within a play? Is it not necessarily the offstage spectator, the person in the theatre and not the personage on the stage? For the onstage spectator, the action of the play within a play is not occurring within some action which he admits to be as unreal as the play he watches. This double relationship, the concept of innerness, obtains only for the offstage spectators (p. 7).

Thus, for Nelson, the characters in the ‘outer’ play do not have to recognize the inner play as performance. It is enough for the audience to recognize that an inner play exists. Considering metadrama as the drama within the drama, Ching-Jung Chiu forwards her idea. She says, “technically, any play which has as its subject other play(s) or drama in general, or which attempts to describe and analyze dramatic practice and theatrical connections and to establish general ‘poetics’ for this particular genre qualifies as metadrama” (pp. 2–3).

Ching-Jung Chiu asserts the practicality, usefulness, and playwright’s hidden motive behind the use of the metadramatic tool. The play-within-the-play device, in her view, is to establish the poetics in the play. Poetics here should be understood as the pleasure and reflection on socio-political issues.

As the play *Bruised Evenings* opens, an elder narrates the story of the plight humans have been facing due to the gods' atrocity. He narrates their helpless condition while providing the background of the plot. His song-like poetic story reminds the audience of an old Nepali myth about God Bhairab and Bhadrakali, their exploitation of common human beings, and the story of the god-human conflicts. As he opens his narrative song:

Elder: Something has happened to them  
They have understood the human power  
These stone figures of this ancient city  
Carved out by these human beings (p. 21).

This song-like narrative of the elder represents Subedi's consciousness in employing the metadramatic technique of real-life reference. It talks about Nepali myth. Bhairab and Bhadrakali are used as symbols of elite power. This opening narrative is used to set the background of the plot and introduce the major characters in the play. "Ancient city carved out by these human beings" refers to the civilization of the Kathmandu Valley. It also marks the self-referential quality of the play from the very beginning. The metatheatrical moment, then, is constituted by combining the representation with the simultaneous auto- or self-reflection on that representation, a running commentary organically fusing staging with self-staging" (Callens, p. 211). Metadrama and theatre metaphor could thus be used to allow theatre to be self-referential. Elizabeth Burns, in *Theatricality: A Study of Convention in the Theatre and in Social Life*, stresses the mutual effects that both theatre and society exert upon one another.

Burns' lines present a broader view of theatricality. She asserts that when the stage appears as a representation of real life and social life as unreal, the drama in performance aims to bring about ideas of reform and change in social values. In some ways, it tries to generate awareness of issues.

Similarly, poetry as a form of performance can also be well observed in *Journey with the Body of Time*. The Body-hero, the protagonist of the monoplay, expresses his helpless condition of being caught in the wheel of time. He becomes more like a poet when he expresses his feelings and emotions as follows:

The Body-hero: What a strange texture of this time!  
No side, no edge, no end, and no beginning. I  
am caught in this wheel of time. There is an empty  
space here that I try to fill up. No space on the  
earth will remain meaningless as long as human  
bodies can move around. Time is the baby of  
human bodies and the earth. (p. 81)

The body-hero expresses his feelings philosophically and spontaneously. Such complex expression is possible only by poets who have an in-depth understanding of life and philosophy. Hence, this piece of poetry suggests a form of performance that gives a metadrama flavor to the play.

*Bruised Evenings* integrates another clear form of drama called shadow-play, known as *Jhyalencha* in Newari. This creates the pattern called play within the play. In this regard, the play makes use of metadramatic technique to awaken and acquaint the audience with the power, enthusiasm, and freedom of creativity at large, as Elder mentions the use of shadow-play:

Elder narrates the story as if this drama is his monologue. He tells the story of the princess and her grooms. With Elder's narration, we see celebrations, marriage, and various colors of her life that change in succession. We see the events in the shadow-play, also called window play or *Jhyalencha* in Newari, behind the thin screen. We can decide the length of the shadow-play according to convenience. But the main event that

governs the story should be shown in the form of shadow-play following the traditional technique of Newar dramaturgy. (pp. 36–37)

Shadow-play, also known as window play or *Jhyalencha* in Newari, is a traditional Newar dramaturgy. It is performed in Patan before *Indrajatra* even today. The significance of shadow-play in the drama makes it easier to present difficult and immoral things on stage. Subedi's use of this technique in the play creates two major effects: 1) it reflects traditional culture in the play; 2) it adds another layer to the play, thereby creating a play-within-the-play effect. This technique is often used behind a thin screen so that an indirect effect of performance can be created among the audience.

Ceremony within the play is Hornby's second postulation on the self-reflexivity of plays. Ceremony within the play is another form of metadrama that relates to the movement and interaction caused by a group of people, mob, throng, etc. Such ceremonies involve cultural celebrations, rituals, rites, *jatras*, festivities, dance performances, movement, or even rebellions. These group activities in the play demarcate the thin line between actor and character, stage and life, illusion and reality. Hornby maintains that ceremonies in the play could be feasts, pageants, games, trials, processions, initiations, etc. "Ceremonies always convey a meaning. They contain encoded signs by which their society understands both the external world around them, and the emotional world within" (Hornby, p. 51). Such ceremonies within the play, as Hornby suggests, are usually suitable for exploring social concerns in drama, which stand as signs of revolution and conflict in society.

The use of masks is one of the important experiments made throughout the play. The use of masks in

the play as metadrama has two different values: wearing masks replicates typical Nepalese cultural tradition and it creates fractures that confuse the boundary between representation and reality. In other words, this draws the audience into the realm of theatre. Such technique therefore adds a metatheatrical feature to the play, as the characters are aware of their own theatricality while implicating the audience in their actions at the same time. Biasin and Gieri, in their *Luigi Pirandello: Contemporary Perspectives*, consider the use of masks in the play to be metatheatrical simulation. They say,

The game between illusion and reduction of illusion, between mask and face, between the simulation that we adopt in order to live and lie, and the fiction that the metatheatre dealing with the social debate on the mask exposes as a mirroring of an illusion. Masks, therefore, are naked because metatheatre prohibits their theatrical simulation by doubling and over tuning such simulation to the point that no theatre is possible but the metatheatrical game on simulation. (p. 62)

The point Biasin and Gieri have raised, and which is caught in these researchers' minds, is metatheatre. It plays hide-and-seek with illusion and the reduction of illusion. Moreover, the use of masks in the play undoubtedly becomes unmasked, as such plays prohibit their theatrical simulation either by doubling or over tuning. This also connotes that the use of masks by the characters blurs the boundary between actor and character. It finds no gap between the actor and the audience, as it stands on metatheatrical consciousness.

Role-playing within the role occurs when a character in the play is aware of his or her roles. It is another seemingly apparent metatheatrical tool observed and

examined in the play. This tool, however, is different from those in the Renaissance. Psychologically, when the character is aware of his roles, his roles should be understood as the true self, as Hornby suggests: "When a playwright depicts a character who is himself playing a role, there is often the suggestion that, ironically, the role is closer to the character's true self than his everyday 'real' personality" (p. 67). Role, in this sense, is a term used in both daily life and theatrical contexts, intersecting the social and dramatic dimensions of a person's identity. The personal role an actor assumes has its connection to social role. In a way, roles in a particular theatre can lead one to examine social role through identity, as Hornby believes: "Theatre is a kind of identity laboratory in which social role can be examined vicariously" (p. 71).

When a play depicts any literary allusions and examples of real-life scenes, the play practices metadrama under the literary and real-life reference category. In other words, by using literature as allusion itself, the metadrama in the play could be categorized as literary reference. The play acts as a system that interacts with other systems represented by these literary influences. Hornby maintains that when the audience realizes this kind of allusion, they experience a metadramatic feeling: "At times metadrama can yield the most exquisite of aesthetic insights, which theorists have spoken of as 'estrangement' or 'alienation'" (p. 32). Estrangement has been used since Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt* (distancing effect) as a means of stimulating the audience's awareness and self-consciousness, emphasizing theatre's social role.

There are four categories of literary reference: citation, allegory, parody, and adaptation. But real-life reference means allusions to real people, places, events, etc. Literary and real-life reference asserts the intertextuality of

theatre and the importance of understanding a play in its cultural code (Hornby, p. 90). Literary and real-life references are key to metadrama. Such references involve the use of allusion, citation, allegory, parody, and adaptation of literary works written by other writers. Even real-life experiences, facts, and data from any domain of knowledge such as science, technology, history, law, culture, etc. in the play also cause metatheatrical dramaturgy. When the playwright talks about such references, knowingly or unknowingly, they make the definition of metadrama as “the depiction of depiction” even broader.

*Journey with the Body of Time* is a creative dramatization of different rasas mentioned in the *Natyashastra* by Bharata Muni. The use of such powerful aesthetic elements also marks the occurrence of literature as a reference in the play. The body-hero observes, experiences, and acts with the rasas as described in the *Natyashastra*. He refers to Bharata Muni, the creator of the *Natyashastra*, and devotes his performance to the rasas. He takes reference as, “Bharata Muni didn’t create these raptures, these emotions. He observed the life journey of this child like sun and shade” (pp. 77–78). Additionally, Subedi explains Bharata Muni, the *Natyashastra*, and the *rasas* in detail in a footnote in the play:

Bharat, in his treatise on dramaturgy regarded as the most ancient Indic poetics of theatre and dance, introduces eight Rasas that can be translated as raptures or even emotional stages considered essential for a theatre practitioner to know. They are Shringara (love), Haasya (humour), Karuna (pathos), Raudra (wrath), Veera (chivalry), Bhayanaka (fear), Beebhatsa (abhorrence), and Adbhuta (wonder). (p. 77)

The rasas introduced by Bharata, as Subedi asserts, are essential theatrical elements a theatre practitioner should know. Since these rasas represent the totality of human emotions, they apply not only to theatrical performance but to every human life. Every human being undergoes all eight emotions in life as an actor does on stage. Literary allusion to these powerful aesthetic elements in the play helps to remove the curtain between theatre and real life. Such emotions function as bridges between illusion and reality in theatre, thereby causing the occurrence of self-reflexivity in the play. Fitch believes, “The diverse ways in which the text reflects upon itself, when it does look beyond itself, reflecting and referring to another text, it is nonetheless still indulging in that propensity to which all texts are, by their very nature, prone: narcissism. The world of text is a world of mirrors, as self-contained as a kaleidoscope” (p. 108).

The play also involves a nuance of literary criticism as a literary reference when Bhairab and the Elder talk about Kali’s misuse of power, finding her becoming more like a deconstructionist. They discuss:

Bhairab: Oh, Kali! That’s the wrong use of power. A kind of vulgar show of strength, and it is a weakness to kill the helpless creatures.

The Elder: I can see that she has become quite a deconstructionist these days. Which theory should I use to study her? (p. 23)

Bhairab and the Elder consider some theories to analyze Kali’s misuse of power, as she has somehow turned into a deconstructionist. They think so because Kali practices her power by killing helpless creatures. Subedi, as a literary critic and professor of English literature, knowingly brings this hint of literary criticism into the discussion.

The play includes the song as a metadramatic tool. Such use of song in the play can again be placed under the



category of ceremony within the play, according to Hornby's categorization. This technique also intersects reality and illusion, as Hornby asserts, "There may be long stories, set speeches, reports of messengers (standard in classical Greek and Roman Drama), pageants, songs or dances that are capable of standing apart, yet which are still presented as fully part of the main action" (p. 33). Hornby believes that such use of songs in the play is part of the main action. They appear as supplementary to the system of the play. Songs, however, add the metadramatic impulse in the play when the Body-hero sings a typical modern song and tries to find the significance of the song lyrics in his life as he sings and speaks:

Body-hero: (*Sings*) *Pokhiera ghamko jhulka bhai sangharama / Timro jindagiko dhoka kholun kholun lagcha hai*. I have made a long journey. I could not open the door of your life. I entered your life through all the emotional entry points. Told the stories of the earth and sky. Looked and acted out its essence. Alas! Could not come with any enthusiasm to cross your dooryard. Oh, what has happened to mother earth! (p. 83)

The Body-hero brings a reference to a modern song to support his helpless condition created by a futile journey. He laments not being able to open the door of his beloved life and refers to a song by Narayan Gopal, composed by Haribhakta Katwal. This typical Western song that he sings turns into a performance within the play in another sense. The song is a real-life performance whether it is sung within the play or outside. The pleasure the audience gets from the song is the same regardless of where it is sung. This blurs the boundary between reality and illusion.

Literary allusion adds significant value to the play as an outcome of metatheatre. There are many obvious cases

where Subedi uses this technique. “*Jhang Jhang Jhang! Sabatko Baila Utsab*” by Bairagi Kaila and “*Jati Uthauchhu ragat bandachha, bisau sadiko pani*” by poet Vijay Malla are some of the literary references the Body-hero brings into his performance. Moreover, the issue becomes even more metadramatic when he discusses the technicalities of Nepali songs and poetry. Here, Subedi uses such songs as an integral part of the main action, or, in other words, the play as a system. This literary allusion in the play reminds readers of the poetry trend based on typical Nepali folk culture. The playwright consciously uses these pieces of poetry to add self-referential quality to the play. He tries to present the literary history of Nepal in the theme. This really reminds the audience of Nepali poets, making the play a self-reflective product.

Self-reference in the play is the most extreme and intense form of metatheatre. It calls attention to itself as a play, which produces an ‘alienation effect’ and avoids catharsis. It occurs in the play when the players’ self-conscious theatricality is realized. Rani argues, “Self-reflexivity refers to the practice of exposing theatre as the subterfuge that it is, in all its insincerities and falsities” (p. 1). This element keeps the play alive and strong even amidst uncertainties.

As for Hornby, “self-reference is always strongly metadramatic. With self-reference, the play directly calls attention to itself as a play, an imaginative fiction” (p. 103). In his view, the dramatic production is the intuitive illusion perceived by the theatre audience against the background of the “logical” world, the “real” world in which the play takes place. He further asserts, “When self-reference occurs in a play, the world of dramatic illusion undergoes a displacement. There is a shift in perception that turns the field of thought inside out. What had been background is

foreground, and vice versa” (p. 116). Redirecting the audience’s attention, even for an instant, from the foreground of the performance to the background is self-referencing.

The Body-hero in *Journey with the Body of Time* is self-conscious of the theatricality and delivers his dialogue accordingly. He refers to acting, an important element of theatricality, when he remarks, “So how much did I emulate life in my acting?” (p. 82). He further reveals this consciousness as he says:

The Body-hero: I am a character of all the times. I am a journey. I am the story of all senses and sensations. I am the movement of the earth and sky. Epochs do not change like this. I say, nothing will remain there once all the feelings evaporate. I do not say this is my last journey. I will travel across the panorama of people’s emotions. I will perform your play with this body. You are also mobile with the selfsame great theatre. (p. 84)

The Body-hero is conscious of theatricality. In other words, he is aware that he is performing and, at the same time, making the audience aware that it is a play being performed on stage. We can easily understand his intention when he uses theatrical diction in the dialogue such as “character,” “story of all senses and sensations,” “perform your play,” and “great theatre.” He is referring to himself as a performer. Though he cleverly confuses his audience in delivering his ideas on life philosophy, he refers to the play and uses a play-life analogy. Such self-reference in the play resembles Richard Flynn’s theorization, which he calls the mirror reflection technique. He says, “With this redirection of the creative process, mimesis gives way to self-analysis, and drama is subsumed in metadrama” (p. 124).

### **Comparing level of self-reflexivity in *Bruised Evenings* and *Journey with the Body of Time***

Metatheatre, as a theatrical paradigm instituted by Lionel Abel, is a dramatic device that seeks to expose theatre as a multi-layered entity, with all its insincerities, pretensions, and intrinsic theatricality. It disrupts the illusion of reality and the reality of illusion that a performance on stage might reinforce. Abel argues, “Metatheatre as a crucial device in the delineation of these self-conscious characters, who are unreservedly aware of their seminal function in determining the nature of events in the play” (p. 77).

*Bruised Evenings* and *Journey with the Body of Time* represent experimental uses of metatheatrical techniques. The plays portray not only drama in its purest and most straightforward form, but also multiple levels of metadrama simultaneously. Both plays reflect reality through the playwright’s metatheatrical awareness, which fills them with abundant metatheatrical elements. Such dramaturgy elevates modern Nepali theatre in terms of experimentation, as the plays challenge the long-standing conventions of both reading and viewing theatrical texts. They exhibit extensive use of metadrama and largely revolve around its forms as depictions of depictions, dramas about drama, and roles within roles. These theatrical devices, thus, break from conventional principles, departing from accepted standards as the dramaturgy builds on metatheatrical awareness.

While *Bruised Evenings* reflects the conflict between gods and humans, issues of class consciousness, and the human celebration of triumph through various cultural activities and *jatras*, *Journey with the Body of Time* is a monoplay that recognizes and celebrates the beauty of the body in performance. “*Bruised Evenings* is a political play based on culture that speaks of our hard time through myths.” (p. 9) Having been chained in a maze of different

rulers, whether religious or political, the people have repeatedly suffered. On the other hand, *Journey with the Body of Time*, through the character Body-hero, narrates the protagonist's journey from birth to exit. The protagonist expresses mixed feelings about his life's journey. He has lived through a time of violence that has bruised him; it was a time that reflects the political upheavals and conflict Nepal has endured.

Hence, both of Subedi's plays reflect the interdependent relationship between social and theatrical traditions. Both plays are theatrical in form and content, with the former being prioritized. Metadrama in these plays enables texts from different historical periods to coexist and is thus significant in revealing the metadramatic nature of the plays. Furthermore, both plays experiment with various metadramatic patterns, each creating a distinct impact on the audience and on the structure of the plays, shaping them into an anti-form, as Calderwood suggests, "Metadrama is a dramatic genre that goes beyond drama (at least drama of a traditional sort), becoming a kind of anti-form in which the boundaries between the play as a work of self-contained art and life are dissolved" (p. 4).

Moreover, both plays make use of multiple forms of metadrama to convey the messages they intend to communicate. They also question the nature of power and dismantle theatrical illusion, thereby shattering social illusions. Similarly, *Journey with the Body of Time*, as a monoplay, includes fewer metadramatic elements in comparison to *Bruised Evenings*. The major difference between these two plays lies in the subject matter itself. The form also varies, as one is an interactive play and another a monoplay in which the degree of metatheatrical awareness the playwright employs differs. This is because a monoplay lacks multiple characters to interact on issues such as

ceremony within a play, roles within roles, and performance within performance. Nevertheless, it still builds upon other forms of self-reflexivity, such as real-life and literary allusions and self-reference.

In short, Subedi's dramaturgy succeeds in using metadrama as a technique of introspection, as the plays evolve our understanding of theatrical metaphor and of theatre as an agent of social critique and change.

### **Conclusion**

Metadrama, being a self-reflexive theatrical technique, typically incorporates theatrical elements such as role-playing, ceremonies, literary allusions, and real-life references. It uses theatre itself as the subject matter within a play and explores how drama and society influence one another. In other words, metadrama and theatricality can be employed to comment on society. Though metadrama may appear narcissistic in some ways, it reflects on both theatre and society, going beyond mere praise of its own structure.

Analyzing the plays from a metatheatrical praxis, the present researchers conclude that Abhi Subedi's *Bruised Evenings* and *Journey with the Body of Time* exhibit abundant patterns of self-reflexivity. Both plays reflect the interdependent relationship between social and theatrical traditions and are theatrical in both form and content. Metadrama in these plays supports the themes and allows for layered understandings of the texts, enabling different historical moments to coexist within the same dramatic framework. They experiment with metadramatic patterns that affect both the audience and the dramatic structure. *Bruised Evenings* is more concerned with socio-political conflict and class struggle, while *Journey with the Body of Time* explores aesthetic rupture. Both plays incorporate the realities of history, culture, and politics, and raise questions about power and autocracy. By dismantling theatrical

illusion, they also challenge social illusion. Role-playing suggests the characters' awareness of theatricality. Folk songs, ceremonies, protest, and rebellion involve the audience as participants. Shadow performance (*Jhyalenchha*), *jatra*, masks, and rituals bring lived reality onto the stage.

Thus, metadrama in Subedi's plays becomes a powerful tool reflecting both society and the ontology of theatre itself. His dramaturgy presents multiple layers of reality, resulting in a "double seeing." Subedi's plays fulfill Hornby's criteria for metatheatre, using self-reflexivity to deepen our understanding of theatre as an agent of critique and change in modern Nepali theatre.

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