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### Metatheatricality and Self-reflexivity in Subedi's Plays

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#### Abstract

This paper seeks to explore meta-theatricality and self-reflexivity in Abhi Subedi's two plays, *A Journey into Thamel* and *The Caretaker's Sky*, to mark how the playwright reflects the changing social and cultural milieus of Nepal through these dramatic techniques. Through a close reading of Subedi's *A Journey into Thamel* and *The Caretaker's Sky* from the metatheatrical perspectives propounded by Lionel Abel and Richard Hornby, the research surveys how the playwright connects theatricality and realism in these plays. *A Journey into Thamel* portrays the hardships of people living in the post-war scenario of Nepalese society. *The Caretaker's Sky* deals with the quest for freedom of creativity. But both plays share the common ground in terms of form, as Subedi's dramaturgy expresses using metadrama as a rhetorical vehicle. In doing so, he uses as many metatheatrical tools as possible in making the plays self-reflective. The chief finding of this research is that Abhi Subedi exploits meta-drama as a rhetorical vehicle and at a time responds to the co-existence of realistic drama, staged theatricality, and anti-theatricalism in these plays so as to portray the Nepalese problems. The research scholars intended to work on Nepali theatre are expected to take the paper as a reference.

**Keywords:** Experimental plays, meta-theatricality, Nepali theatre, realism, self-reflexivity

#### Introduction

Experimentation has been marked in the Nepali plays that began with Bal Krishna Sama in the early twentieth century. Modern Nepalese plays are "associated with religious and seasonal rituals and festivals" (Davis, 2010, p. 177),

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and “based on social subjects to depict the Nepalese lifestyle” (Mottin, 2007, p. 321). The research paper surveys how Abhi Subedi crafts *A Journey into Thamel* and *The Caretaker’s Sky*, both dramas published in 2003, as experimental plays interacting with metatheatrical techniques. The use of meta-theatricality in his plays ascends modern Nepalese theatre to a new height challenging the hitherto existing conventions of both readings and seeing the culture of the plays (Pokharel, n.d.). Thematically both plays differ; however, they share common ground in terms of meta-theatrical techniques and blur the traditional limitations of plays being anti-realistic amid the realism time and again. Abhi Subedi, a Nepalese playwright, poet, critic, and essayist, is recognized for his contribution to literature in both English and Nepali languages. The playwright voices the voice of historically muted women and ordinary people (Mishra, 2020). Subedi creates the world of marginalized people in his plays, where he brings in characters not very often used in mainstream literature. He takes different ingredients to his plays ranging from culture, rituals, religion to the meta-theatre, and postmodernity (Rijal, 2004). Subedi is also lauded for his style of introducing post-modern western styles of writing and creating the characters who realize the meaning of life once they face the bitter reality of life (Vatsayana, 2005). In the present dramas, *Journey into Thamel* and *The Caretaker’s Sky*, based on meta-theatre, the characters themselves act, direct, and discuss the play. *The Caretaker’s Sky* presents the complexity and challenges of modern life and life philosophy (Rijal, 2004). It tries to replicate the human quest of meaning in life. *A Journey into Thamel* is a quasi-historical play depicting a long-rooted aristocratic Nepalese family on the verge of downfall due to certain elements of social transformation.

Divided into five short acts, *A Journey into Thamel* is set on the historical palace, with the characters related to the palace and its hidden mystery in one way or the other. It does not have a central character unlike most of the experimental plays (Uprety, 2007). Bipin is the caretaker of the palace. The old woman, namely Rumjadidi, hardly makes her presence in the play; yet again the entire play is associated with her. There are other characters like Anup Nepali, Bhaskar Malla who are theatre actors and who plan to stage a post-modern play and wait for Rumjadidi’s arrival as if she is a key to everybody’s freedom. They plan, argue, act, and prepare a script for the play. Everyone is on a theatrical journey. When they attend *jatra* at the end they finish seeing a stage where different artists, painters, theatre directors, actors, poets, musicians are performing different forms of art. The closing scene of flowering creativity transforms in any reader or audience the sense of freedom through art. It portrays the way society transforms into a vast abyss of inequality present between capitalists and serfs. The minor characters in the plays are rarely given significant space and names of their own. *A Journey of Thamel*

demonstrates lots of metatheatrical elements throughout. The use of ballad singers, poetry, masks, randomly used dialogues, a celebration of the ceremony are some of the metatheatrical elements. At the very outset, a troubadour sings about the first Rana Prime Minister, Janga Bahadur Rana, and how he seized the power. This song of the troubadour is used as the refrain in the entire drama for depicting the hardship of people in reality (Updety, 2007). Jeewan, a poet often seems self-reflexive in his talks. However, these realistic plays exhibit and to some extent revolve around the depictions of depictions, the dramas of dramas, and especially in *The Caretaker's Sky*. Thus, the paper seeks to explore what message Subedi wanted to give using meta-theatrical elements in the plays.

### **Methods and Procedures**

This study develops a theoretical modality based on meta-theatrical praxis. It applies a qualitative approach to research by using the primary resources, that is, Abhi Subedi's plays, *Journey into Thamel* and *The Caretaker's Sky*, and secondary resources such as literature from journals, websites commentaries. In addition to the close reading of the plays, the researcher uses the analytical research method to mark metatheatrical elements highlighted by the pioneers of the meta-theatre, Lionel Abel and Richard Hornby.

'Metadrama' or 'metatheatre' or even 'self-reflexivity in theatre' is a theatrical technique that emerged and developed in the western theatrical arena. Abel (1963), who coined the term 'metatheatre', introduces meta-plays as "theatre pieces about life seen already theatricalized" (p. 61). In one way or the other, it was in practice in Greek theatre, Oriental and ancient Sanskrit plays. In modern drama studies, Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953), and Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) are the skillful subversion of meta-theatrical conventions that lead to a rediscovery of realities beyond the grasp of rational thinking. With his emphasis on the fictiveness of plot and character, a meta-theatre is "the playwright's invention" (Abel, 1963, p. 59). Meta-theatre foregrounds the illusion of theatrical reality created by a dramatic performance. For Abel, all "meta-plays or works of meta-theatre are theatre pieces about life seen already theatricalized" (p. 61). The metatheatrical heroes are different from other theatrical figures in that "they are aware of their theatricality" (Abel, 1963, p. 60). Abel (1963) concluded his study of metatheatre with two observations: "The world is a stage and life is a dream" (p. 60). The first statement implies that the world is a projection of human consciousness: it is a man-made artifice, created by imagination. The second one emphasizes the flexibility and malleability of fate, and the dream like nature of existence.

Similarly, Hornby (1986) provided a concise and form-oriented analysis of the genre, pinpointing several easily recognizable forms of metadrama, such as “the play-within- the play, the ceremony within the play” (p.19). Role-playing and self-references are marked in the metadrama. Hornby (1986) defined metadrama as “a drama about drama” (p.31). A drama becomes melodramatic by its subject, which is always willy-nilly and complex (Hornby, 1986). Hornby (1986) further wrote, “A playwright is constantly drawing on his knowledge of drama as a whole as his vocabulary’ or his subject-matter” (p. 30). The cultural uniqueness is best reflected through the metatheatrical techniques.

This theorization of Abel becomes broader when he categorizes the forms of metadrama and reaches its core technical aspects as to regard metadrama as drama within drama. When the subject of the play becomes the play itself, there is the occurrence of metatheatrical phenomena. As all plays in one way or the other involve the drama/culture complex, such depiction becomes metadramatic. Every play in this sense is metadramatic construct. Specifically, he defines that if the play depicts on the play already heard or seen, that is a metadrama. Pavis (2020) defined Metatheatre as “a form of anti-theatre” (p. 59) where the demarcation between fantasy and reality is erased. All types of metadrama have in common, a self-referential quality, whether to the theatre, or to performance.

Thus, the present paper seeks to expose Subedi’s experimental interaction of techniques as metadrama and self-reflexivity in his plays, *A Journey into Thamel* and *The Caretaker’s Sky* from the meta-theatrical theories of Lionel Abel and Richard Hornby to note the motive of the playwright for using such techniques.

### **Literature Review**

Down through the publication of *A Journey into Thamel* and *The Caretaker’s Sky* (2003), they have been viewed and reviewed in different ways. For many critics, *A Journey into Thamel* is a postmodern play bearing both the modern and postmodern traces of contemporary Nepalese culture. Uprety (2007) marked the drama, *A Journey into Thamel*, as the blend of pre-modernity and post-modernity, where Thamel works as the bridging element. Some critics have attempted to analyze the plays through feminist perspectives. Mishra (2020) noticed the miserable conditions of females in the patriarchal Nepalese society depicted in Abhi Subedi’s dramas. Rayamajhi(2003) evaluated the objectification of female characters like Muma Hajur and Rumjadidi in these words:

The playwright vividly brings to the present time, when young girls were brought to such houses of the aristocrats to serve as maids the ladies of the houses. These maids, where they devoted their whole lives to the service of

the lords and ladies were either lost in the maze of the aristocratic households or surfaced as strong and powerful women winning the hearts and minds of the members of the household. (p. 11)

This demonstrates the unfair gender treatment in Nepalese society. Subedi's dramatization of rituals, unique culture, *jatra* is often lauded by critics. Rijal (2004) examined the use of local culture, rituals, and their values in Subedi's writing in these words:

In *The Caretaker's Sky* characters wait for the *jatra*. They are street theatre artists by profession. By the time *jatra* begins, they enter into the theatre having a cultural caliber. Such scenes dramatize three different streams of Nepali theatre: proscenium or closed, street play, and cultural dance. (p. 21)

The *jatra* is a reflection of the unique and diverse Nepalese culture according to Rijal's interpretation. Vatsayana (2005) claimed that Subedi exposes the sense of self-discovery in his plays: "With simple but deceptive language, Subedi goes into another era and culture" (p. 25). Subedi definitely belongs to the post-modern era for his experimental approaches.

In this way, different critics have their different perspectives on analyzing *A Journey into Thamel* and *The Caretaker's Sky*. Nevertheless, critics have not paid attention to research on the technicalities of the plays. Critics did not notice how meta-theatrical consciousness develops behind the scenes observing contemporary political and social issues of the Nepalese society. Here lies the research gap. Hence, the paper attempts to probe into plays of Subedi to note his objective in exploiting such theatrical techniques through the analysis of meta-theatrical criticism.

### **Results and Discussion**

*A Journey into Thamel* and *A Caretaker's Sky*, demonstrate Subedi's splendid craftsmanship of utilizing experimental techniques as a playwright. The play deflates the reality through his metatheatrical awareness and catapults modern Nepalese theatre into a new height. Subedi's dramas challenge the hitherto existing convention of both reading and seeing the plays. Metatheatrical often tends to be anti-theatrical, where the dividing line between play and real-life is erased (Pavis, 2020). Both plays depict the absurdities of long-rooted aristocratic Nepalese family and domestic war so as highlight the creativity and unity of the Nepalese people as reflected in the folk songs. Many metadramatic patterns prevail in the play to reflect the ongoing interaction between society and the theatre.

## Metatheatrical Craftsmanship in *A Journey into Thamel*

The use of song, a distinct metadramatic tool, is marked at the outset of the play. As the play *A Journey into Thamel* opens, a troubadour is singing a folk song somewhere in a corner of Thamel. This technique intersects in reality and illusion. Songs or dances are presented as fully part of the main action in metadrama (Hornby, 1986). The troubadour's song reminds the audience of the Nepalese history of the Rana regime. He recalls the days of Rana Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana, who was the first Prime Minister of Nepal to visit Britain. The song in the play has double functions: the reflection of real-life history and the performance itself.

The troubadour, carving the beautiful songs out of our history and culture, exposes the play to the sense of our traditional folk culture. He repeatedly sings: "Albert Maharaj was born/When Jung Bahadur Maharaj/And B. P. Maharani made a union/In the flower garden of Belayat" (p. 86). This song of a troubadour, known as *gaine*, represents Subedi's consciousness of filing the metadramatic technique of real-life reference. It glorifies Nepalese history representing Jung Bahadur image of a romantic hero. This bizarre song of troubadour marks the self-referential quality of the play from the very beginning. The opening lines of the troubadour also clarify that a metadrama entails an element of self-reference and self-reflection. In meta-theatre, the reflection upon theatre and society is fused with self-staging (Pavis, 2020). In some way, it has a social function to share. Subedi uses this metadramatic technique not for pleasure alone but with the intention of altering the audience's attitude and behavior.

Jeeven in *A Journey into Thamel* is a poet who often delivers long and absurd poetic dialogues. Hornby (1986) deemed that the poetic performance within the play is intended to demonstrate how characters interact with culture and society. Performance within the play can be well noted when he says:

Guests from across the seven seas  
Holding on to crumbling dreams  
Here at the edge of Thamel  
Thamel is a flow  
Here something flows  
I am standing on the edge of that flow  
Looking at its incessant flow  
The journey into Thamel  
It is journey of history itself. (p. 92)

Jeewan, the poet character delivers a poetic dialogue as to introduce the kind of city Thamel is. He also describes the journey into Thamel as the journey of history itself. Subedi picks the title of the play, *A Journey into Thamel* from the very line of Jeewan's dialogue. In his description, he appears more like a poet performing in front of the mass. This makes the audience feel that they too are part of the performance.

Subedi uses violence and rebel skillfully in his play, *A Journey into Thamel*. Violence and rebel are essential elements of metadrama (Simon, 2011). The play was written during the Maoist Movement in Nepal during the nineties. Nepalese society was in constant decline up until the revolutionary revival of democracy in 2004 AD. In a way, Subedi writes like a rebel calling for social change amidst the conflicting forces in society. The play, therefore, dramatizes the war-aggravated Nepalese society to make people realize how horrible the war was (Uprety, 2007). Many such metadramatic elements as marches, parades, rebels, street protests, explosions, and so on are used in the play. Such elements can be regarded as the ceremony within the play, an integral part of the procession of the revolution the play is representing. Hornby (1986) maintained, "Ceremonies contain encoded sign by which their society understands both the external world around them and the emotional world within" (p. 51). In the very first scene of the play, *A Journey into Thamel* Mahesh Raja describes the scenario of conflict his society is going through in these words: "People are at the moment moving about in all the directions. Little children walk about carrying guns. The bigger armed government personnel are having an armed conflict. Fire burns all around you" (p. 95). These lines depict the nature of revolution where even the children are used as the rebels.

Life is pretty hard for everyone because of such violence. Similarly, off-stage parades and marches are used in the second scene of the play. Subedi maintains an off-stage description of such ceremonies: "Sloganeering is heard in the background. All unanimously shout out uuuuuuh! And step back. Slogans and explosions are heard in the background" (p. 125). In the play, there are different rebel characters who are named Gunman1, Gunman 2, Gunman 3, and so on. The rebellious spirit of the Gunmen reaches higher when they snatch away the guns owned by Muma Hajur and her relatives:

Gunman 1: Put down the gun, otherwise we shoot. Don't try to fight us. We are many. Everybody could die here. Give us all the guns. We will go away once.

Muma Hajur: The guns of this place can never go anywhere else. These guns have history. These are not trivial guns. (p. 126)

Muma Hajur's insistence on preserving the guns used by her forefathers symbolizes her intention of preserving history, but the rebels attempt to erase it. The use of guns, disputes, street protests, and explosions in the drama denote the playwright's skill of using metatheatrical consciousness to reflect the class conflict of the contemporary society

The play also abounds with the use of masks, another key tenet of metadrama. Biasin and Gieri (2000) considered that mask is used in the play for metatheatrical simulation. The use of masks in the play gets unmasked as such plays prohibit their theatrical simulation either by doubling or over tuning (Abel, 1963; Jin-xia, 2019). This also connotes that the use of masks by the character blurs the boundary between actor and character. Wearing a mask in the play replicates the typical Nepalese cultural tradition and at the same time blurs the boundary between representation and reality. This draws the audience into the realm of theatre. There are a number of instances in *A Journey into Thamel* where the characters use masks. Subedi constructs a norm among the characters that donning a mask one would not get hurt even in the explosion and bombing. This is the private craft of Subedi's dramaturgy indeed. He establishes such norms through the discussion of mask and its usefulness when Gunman and Jeewan interact:

Jeewan: (*Taking off his mask and looking around at everybody*)

The most immediate thing that should be done is this. After doing that one need not leave the stage. No matter how much of explosions there are outside if you wear a mask there is no need to leave the stage. Whatever occurs does occur between the mask and invisible explosions. Our time moves in this very way. (p. 97)

Jeewan maintains the quality of self-reflectivity with the mask he uses. Mask for him is the shield that protects his existence. The use of masks is a metatheatrical tool that appeals to the audience to become a part of theatricality since the play reveals itself (Jin-xia, 2019). Jeewan apparently becomes a self-conscious character in between the representation and reality.

Metadrama uses literature as an allusion, as a literary reference; and this is noticed in the play. When the audience realizes this kind of an allusion, they experience a meta-dramatic feeling (Hornby, 1986). On many occasions, Subedi's dramaturgy brings in literature as a reference. When in Scene two Devyani and Mahesh Raja argue upon the possession of guns, Mahesh Raja charges Devyani of becoming more rigid:



Devyani: First talk to me, not with Jwai Saab [son-in-law].

Mahesh Raja: Why? Isn't Jwai Saab here? You speak in the same manner as Martha speaks to her husband in Albee's drama, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* But this is life not drama, baini. (p. 99)

This conversation between Devyani and Mahesh Raja brings into literary allusion in the play. The use of such reference and allusion in the play, as Biasin and Gierie (2000) believed, "leads one to exit the theatre as an illusion, and forces the audience to question the notion of theatre as a double of reality" (p. 61). Mahesh Raja compares Devyani with Martha. Martha is a female character in Edward Albee's drama, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, published in 1962, that examines the breakdown of the marriage of a middle-aged couple, Martha and George (Uprey, 2007). This reference here is an outcome of the conscious mind of the playwright to interact metadrama. Moreover, the illusion and reality tussle when Mahesh Raja in the same line reminds Devyani that they are leading a real-life not that of drama.

Depiction of history and culture in a play, another form of the real-life reference, and a characteristic of metatheatrical, is observed in the play. When the playwright turns to real-life history and culture of the particular society, there are more chances that the play represents the mirrors the socio-political scenarios (Hornby, 1986). In the first scene of the play, *A Journey into Thamel* a male character and female character talk about the history of trade Nepal used to have. They however focus on fostering their trade and culture in a better way. They interact:

Male Character: (*Cutting off mid-sentence*) Well, talking about trade, Nepal used to have trade transactions with Lhasa since Chanakya's time. There was this system of bringing Yak wool rug from there.

Female Character: (*Cutting off mid-sentence*) our ways, our culture, we have to be able to introduce our culture to the tourists. (p. 89)

Male and female characters converse about the prosperity of the Nepalese culture from the onset of history. The meta-theatrical plays give space for the characters to discuss on the cultural and current aspects of the societies they belong to (Hornby, 1986). This is the reality that Nepal had a very good economy during Chanakya's time. From these lines, it is also obvious that Nepal had a good international relationship with Lhasa as they used to exchange the transaction. The female character, therefore, wants to introduce Nepalese culture to the tourist through the tourism industry. This is how Subedi tries to develop metatheatrical awareness in the play.

Another easily caught example of reflection of history can be noted when Muma Hajur speaks about Rana Regime in Nepal and British Rulers in India. She compares those moments with her present social patterns. She, as a descendent of Rana rulers, finds in them the glory and pride and feels that her presence is the most annoying part of her life. She brings in the reference of history as she speaks, “We should be able to understand the power of the old guns, the guns with which our ancestors went hunting with the British Rulers” (p. 109). Muma Hajur in these lines refers to some of the real-life historical events. She mentions Rana Regime, British Rule in India, and disorder in her present life society caused by the Maoist-led armed movement. She glorifies her old days and is worried about her present. Presenting here the history as such, Subedi aims to recall the old day that tries to represent the reality in his play.

Subedi juxtaposes reflective fragments of dialogue to depict the absurdity of life in the play. Subedi tries to present what is absent by the limitation of thought in such dialogues. Melodramas embody the fragments of dialogue to reflect the futility of life (Abel, 1963). Indeed, he appears to be the master of utilizing such metatheatrical devices. Such dialogues stop the motion of the play and mingle the past, present, and future together as the minor characters in the play converse:

Female Character: Did I not tell you earlier on that it would not be?

Male Character: What difference does it make if you say it will not be?

Female Character: Why would not it make a difference? When is the work finished?

Male Character: (*Cutting off mid-sentence*) let’s forget about finishing the work

Female Character: (*Cutting off mid-sentence*) how can I do that? Today he said Jung Bahadur had risen. (p. 87)

These randomly reflected dialogues are pretty hard to understand because the characters are not identified. Rijal (2004) reviewed on the dialogues of *A Journey into Thamel* in these words: “When the dialogues get reflected randomly, there develops the metatheatrical awareness in the play” (p. 24). The theme that the characters are talking about is clueless. They interrupt each other while talking. Their conversation sounds simply absurd.

The use of the song is marked throughout the play. This technique intersects in reality and illusion. Hornby (1986) asserted, “Songs or dances that are capable of standing apart, yet which are still presented as fully part of the main action” (p. 33). Songs, however, add the metadramatic impulse in the play when Rama and Hima sing the typical folk song and talk about song in scene three as:

Rama: It would naturally make a difference to you; you grew up with the gun as a pillow. We have a song from Western Nepal what is it? O yes, *Kadhaima Bandukko sirani/ chha maachhi jalaima* [Gun is held as pillow/as fish caught in a net].

Hima: Yes, of course diju. You were talking about a song. Many of the things Similar you know in our side of Himanchal and Gadwal. We have a similar song!

I'll sing in Nepali itself. OK? *Kholama pani bagya kasaile nadekhya/ mero Aakhama aansu aaya sabaile dekhye* [Nobody notices water in a river, but everybody notices tears in my eyes]. (pp. 54-55)

The conversation between Rama and Hima includes two different songs. While talking about the difficulties one has while having a new settlement in a new culture, Rama recalls the old song from Western Nepal (Uprety, 2007). This typical western song that she sings turns into the performance within the play. Moreover, the issue becomes even more metadramatic when they discuss the similarities of the song of different Nepalese communities. However, Subedi uses such the songs as an integral part of the main action.

Dream and fantasy are other subtle elements of metadrama employed by Subedi in his play. He connects theatre with dreams and aims to critique the socio-political situation of Nepalese society. Realistic elements are blended with fantasy to reflect the contemporary social problems in meta-plays (Abel, 1963). The connection between theatre and dream can be noted in *A Journey into Thamel* in the conversation between Mahesh Raja and Jeewan:

Mahesh Raja: Whatever I do I will suffer it at that time, for now, I have two persons to see. I will meet you again right here if not there.

Jeewan: Well then sell. Sell the heartbeat of your house, sell the illusion, and sell our dreams that were amassed by your forefathers by oppressing us. To build their dreams your forefathers used to dismantle ours. (pp. 96-97)

This conversation between Mahesh Raja and Jeewan demonstrates that human beings take dreams as an integral part of life. Jeewan's response to Mahesh Raja regarding dreams becomes very philosophical when he connects it with reality. Mahesh Raja, as a representative character of bourgeoisie mentality still dreams to control over the power and prestige whereas Jeewan opposes his dream (Rayamajhi, 2003). He firmly clarifies that Mahesh Raja's forefathers had already dismantled their dreams but now Jeewan wishes to celebrate the history as common property.

History for him does not belong to a single person. Putting forward his ideas clearly, Jeewan seems satisfied. Sudedi uses dreaming in ironic sense. Dream damages people's activeness. Subedi, playing with this technique, critiques the socio-political issues and shows how modern people are living their life as a dream.

### ***Role-Playing in Subedi's The Caretaker's Sky***

Abhi Subedi in *The Caretaker's Sky* integrates two dominant metadramatic patterns: the play within the play and role-playing within the roles. The use of this tool in Nepali theatre brings forth the dialectics of drama and life, illusion and reality, seeming and being, acting and doing. Subedi seems to create an illusion and then shatter it in the play. Hornby (1986) affirms that a playwright depicts a character that is "closer to the character's true self" (p. 67). A higher level of metatheatrical consciousness develops in the play, *The Caretaker's Sky*, as it incorporates two layers parallel to the metadramatic patterns: "First there is the play that Anup, Bipin, and Bhaskar Malla prepare to stage" (p. 4) and the whole play itself of *The Caretaker's Sky* as presented to the audience. This play, thus, makes use of metadramatic techniques in order to awaken and acquaint the audience with the power, enthusiasm, and freedom of creativity at large.

The play, *The Caretaker's Sky*, opens with the scene where Bipin, the caretaker of the old palace murmurs himself about his life. He sounds more like a philosopher and a poet rather than a mere caretaker. His heavily loaded words on human life and his quest for freedom pervade the opening scene of the play. As the play proceeds, other characters like "Anup Nepali, Bhaskar Malla, and theatre actresses join him" (p. 7). Everyone looks impatient and their dialogues sound as if they are in the quest of something. It appears later that all of them are associated with theatre. There are theatre directors, scriptwriters, dancers, poets, and actors. Rumjadidi, as Uprety (2007) evaluated, becomes the focal figure of the play from whom they expect the way to freedom, the freedom of creativity. They argue, plan and describe the theatricality of the play they want to stage. Their play keeps on developing as the main play develops. The role-play reflects the character's true self (Dustagheer & Newman, 2018). They write the script, divide the roles, and discuss the appropriateness of the techniques of the play. In this sense, the play is all about the play within the play which depicts the theatricality in a particular and theatrical journey of the characters in general and which ultimately results in the sprouting of freedom of art and creativity in them.

Bipin's long monologue opens the play. Although monologues are not explicitly marked as meta-dramatic by Hornby, I believe them to fit into the metadramatic category possibly as a self-reference. Such technique draws attention

to the artifice and illusion of theatre since it breaks the audience's immersion into the actions of the play. Hornby (1986) believed that "With self-reference, the play directly calls attention to itself as a play. So the audience is made to look at the play as an artificial construction with events that are not to be taken seriously" (p. 103). With this kind of metadrama, the fourth wall, behind which the audiences are supposedly eavesdropping, is shattered in front of their eyes, destructing and deconstructing the illusion of the audience and of theatre itself.

*The Caretaker's Sky* makes use of multilayered techniques through which Subedi's message about the quest of freedom of art is embedded. Abel (1963) found the instrumental motive of the playwright when he employs the tool as a play within the play. When it comes to self-reflective dramaturgy, it has roots somewhere in the original source. The degree of such elements in the plays may vary but still, the major motive of the playwright in such a case is to flow the message in an even more subtle manner. The technique of play within the play, therefore, makes the audience perceive the theme the playwright intends to pass. Characters' awareness of their own theatricality through this tool resembles the scene in *The Caretaker's Sky* when Anup Nepali and Bipin discuss the usefulness of training the theatre artists. Their conversation also marks that they are in the initial phase of staging the play they talk about:

Bipin: It is strange. There is no point in training someone with singing, dancing and acting.

Anup Nepali: Why not?

Bipin: What is its outcome? Train the girls. What can they do in the future?

Anup Nepali: You are right but from the training, they will learn what life is.

Bipin: How can they see life from learning acting?

Anup Nepali: By the difference between life and drama. (p. 238)

The dialogue reveals Anup Nepali as the veteran theatre director who convinces Bipin about the importance of art in human life. Bipin keeps questioning the value of training someone on drama, dance, music, and acting (Vatsayana, 2005). Anup clarifies that people who learn dance and acting at least understand the meaning of life, as is often marked in the Nepalese myth. Any play is metadrama to some extent because of its attachment to the original source, myth (Simon, 2011). Anup and Bipin can differentiate the reality of life from drama. This dialogue primarily gives us a hint that Anup Nepali is in the initial phase of playing a drama. It is a depiction of the play as Subedi handles the metatheatrical tool of play within the play. This scene is equally significant as the audience's mind is hit by the idea of what is going to come next in their play.

When drama has the subject matter of drama itself, a case of metadrama, such a tool also establishes the poetic. Chiu (2000) opined, “Technically, any play 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). Moreover, it is a layering technique that allows for introspection. The inward movement of metadrama allows for layers of introspection (Newman, 2018). Poetics used in the play should be understood not just as a source of pleasure but also as a reflection of socio-political issues. In this sense, this is a unique technique used to raise a voice against the social issues that critique reality despite being self-reflective in form. The drama’s exploration of itself in every possible aspect ranging from its medium, connection, form, function to status may come up with the holistic message of social life.

Another possible example of role playing is noticed when again the characters discuss the nature of theatre. Bipin, First Lady, and Anup Nepali talk about the world of theatre. This scene is reflective of the fact that they are even more aware of the theatricality when they discuss:

Bipin: What is the sky of theatre like?

Anup Nepali: I cannot say exactly. Theatre has the drama of the sky too. The drama of the sky is performed after painting, adding music and effects of light. Drama is the acting of the sky. (p. 240)

Bipin metaphorically asks his co-actors about the reality they were brought up in. He argues that he is known to all of their sorrows. Anup however responds that his upbringing resembles that of Bipin. But First Lady, as Vatsayana (2005) observed, finds a difference between real-life and life in drama. Bipin does not know what the world of theatre looks like. Anup again clarifies that the world of theatre is a unique world where reality is brought in as the theme of the play. Combination of music, light, and effect with reality results in the world of meta-theatre (Abel, 1963). In this dialogue, Anup’s awareness of what builds the theatre is clear. Though the level of theatrical awareness among characters seems low, Subedi through this dialogue unnoticeably clarifies and at a time differentiates paradoxical notions of real-life and representation of life.

Role-playing within the role is an apparent meta-theatrical tool (Hornby, 1983). Subedi skillfully incorporates it into the play. Subedi’s role-playing can be incorporated in the technique of play within the play that forms a meta-dramatic consciousness. The role-playing aspect in the meta-theatre is intended to reflect human consciousness (Dustagheer & Newman, 2018). It is observed in the play when Rishi Singh, BhaskarMalla, and Anup Nepali divide the roles for their postmodern play they are to stage. The scene makes use of the same multiple layered techniques

but in terms of roles; for, actors seem to be coming in and getting out of their multiple roles as in Scene two when the actors talk:

Anup Nepali: This play is designed as per the roles of the characters.

Bhaskar Malla: This play consists of everyone's story.

Anup Nepali: Irony will be constructed in the play. One will be given the same role that he/she feels difficult to play. It makes the formation of irony.

Bhaskar Malla: One who cannot run will get the role to run, one who cannot speak should speak. A liar gets the role of telling truth. One who tortures others will be the agent of peace and who has never loved anyone will be given the role of lover. (pp. 250-51)

The dialogue is descriptive of how the characters are conscious of the theatricality. In a way, it becomes the depiction of the roles in the play. Anup Nepali wants to form irony in the play. This indicates their concern about the technique of the play they want to employ. Bhaskar Malla, on the other hand, decides to make the play even more postmodern by giving actors difficult roles (Uprety, 2007). One who feels doing something deserves the same role for him. Their discussion suggests that they are designing a very genuine postmodern play.

There are many obvious cases where Subedi uses literary allusions in *The Caretaker's Sky*. The skillful uses of literary allusions in the play add a significant value as an outcome of the meta-theatre (Newman, 2018). We can notice it when Anup Nepali recalls the piece of a poem composed by Agam Singh Giri. It reads: "Parvat pakha bhir pakhera/ Kshan khan/ Hera na Ram jhankuiro lagyo" [God Ram, see hills and dales are covered with fog] (p. 253). This literary allusion in the play reminds readers of the poetry trend based on typical Nepali folk culture. The Hindu deity Ram is addressed to solve the problem of people when the hills and plains are covered by fog. Subedi consciously uses this piece of the poem to add the self-reference quality of the play. He attempts to present in the theme the literary history of Nepal. Agam Singh Giri is a poet of distinction who is regarded as one who best represented the Indian Nepalese (Gorkha) people in Nepali literature who writes of sadness felt incessantly by him and a rather over-burdensome sadness pervades his poems.

In this way, Subedi makes potential use of play-within-the-play and role-playing-within-the-roles, remarkable metatheatrical technique, in the play, *The Caretaker's Sky* to highlight the social and dramatic dimensions of a person's identity. The characters of the dramas are engaged in playing some kinds of roles. They discuss how they can abolish the unfair power politics of the leaders and rulers so as to provide justice to the common public. The use of the literary allusions in *The Caretaker's Sky* is intended to glorify the Nepalese history and culture and make the public aware of the beautiful Nepali culture.

## Conclusion

Thus, by skillfully using the experimental metadramatic tools in the plays, *A Journey into Thamel* and *The Caretaker's Sky*, Abhi Subedi reflects the philosophical problems marked in contemporary Nepalese society. In *The Caretaker's Sky*, Subedi exposes the intricacies and hardship of life and replicates the human quest for meaning. The play exhibits and to some extent revolves around the depiction of depictions, the dramas of drama, and the roles within the roles. *The Caretaker's Sky* deals with the search for freedom of creativity. Melodramatic technique is used in the play to reveal the hardships of life and creativity. In *A Journey into Thamel*, Subedi unmasks the absurdities of long-rooted aristocratic Nepalese society. Distinct metadramatic patterns prevail in both plays to reflect the ongoing interaction between society and the theatre. *A Journey into Thamel* has a quasi-historical content because Subedi intends to depict the post-war scenario of Nepalese society. The metatheatrical technique used in the play demonstrates how the dream of an aristocratic family shatters due to the domestic war in the play. It is worth noting that different self-referential patterns allow each play to have different levels of introspection upon itself, upon the socio-politics of culture, and upon life in general. Subedi makes ample use of meta-theatrical devices to demonstrate the play-like nature of life and to explore myriad possibilities of representing life through theatre. Thus, meta-theatre has undergone several transmutations to reflect the predicament of changing social and cultural milieus. Subedi's plays, therefore, breaks with the conventional theatre principles falling away from the accepted standard as his dramaturgy builds on metatheatrical awareness so as to unearth and attack discriminations exploitation on marginalized people. But both plays share the common ground in terms of form as Subedi interacts with metadrama as a rhetorical vehicle. In so doing, he uses as many metatheatrical tools as possible making the plays self-reflective. The research therefore analyses metatheatrical elements in the play bringing into detail the different critics as Lionel Abel, Richard Hornby etc. and at the same time maintains how theatricality and realism co-exists in the same plays.

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