

Cross-dressing and Modern Nepali Plays: A Contextual Reading


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Abstract

This paper explores the presence of cross-dressing based theatrics in *Mukunda Indira*, *Sahanshila Sushila* and *Masan* written by the first generation modern male Nepali playwrights Balkrishna Sama (1902-1981), Bhimnidhi Tiwari (1911-1973) and Gopal Prasad Rimal (1918-1973) respectively. It does so by defining the cross-dressing as dominant theatrics in the Kathmandu Valley during the first half of twentieth century. There did exist a number of theatre groups active during the Gaijatra festival that falls in August, and artists known for their cross-dressing talents were popular. The Rana rulers employed artists in their palaces and would invite theatre talents from the then Calcutta to train their subjects. By contextualizing these plays and playwrights to the aesthetic and social forces of the 1930s and 1940s, this paper reads selected dramatic scenes from the plays as sites to excavate and examine presence of cross-dressing-based theatrics of the time. Drawing insights from Stephen Greenblatt and others' research on cross-dressing based theatre of renaissance London, the paper interprets the three plays and reaches to a conclusion that cross-dressing based aesthetics needs to be discussed and defined as dynamic artistic force behind the making of modern Nepali theatre.

Keywords: Cross-dressing, Dramaturgy, Parsi Theatre, Social Anxiety, Theatrics

Era of awakening

Modern theatre and drama in Nepali language emerged by the late 1930s. Balkrishna Sama (1902-1981) and Bhimnidhi Tiwari (1911-1973) and their plays *Mukunda Indira* (1938) and *Sahanshila Sushila* (1939) are regarded as landmarks in the history of modern Nepali dramaturgy. Gopal Prasad Rimal (GP Rimal) (1918-1973) and his *Masan* (1946) is appreciated for heralding realism in the domain of modern dramaturgy. Dramatic action in these plays centers around female characters, and talking about women's issues was social issues of the time, i.e. the last phase of autocratic Rana regime (1846-1950). Critics and historians have credited Sama, Tiwari and Rimal for heralding a new era of creativity through creating powerful female characters. But these women characters were staged by all male artists. Playwrights imagined them through cross-dressing based theatrics, a dominant mode of theatrical representation of women during the period. This paper highlights this very fact that female characters in their leading and minor roles in these plays carry not only social anxieties but also dominant aesthetics of the time. Historians and critics have made some passing remarks about cross-dressing based theatrics. However, not much attention has been paid to the presence of cross-dressing mode of representation or theatrics in the plays. This paper investigates how plays written during the period carry cross-dressing based theatrics within their dramatic structure. It regards the plays as materials to realize the role such theatrics did play in the making of modern Nepali theatre. In order to bring this message home, it draws insights from scholarship available on cross-dressing based theatrics in the west, mainly during the Renaissance London. Bringing ideas from their research, it concludes that the plays written during the period are materials which pulsate with cross-dressing theatrics.

Dramaturgy of Departures

Nepal drama critics and historians regard the late 1930s as rise of modern Nepali playwrights and theatre. They credit these plays, for that matter, *Mukunda Indira*, *Sahanshila Sushila* and *Masan* for bringing new plot structure, socially rooted characters and innovative craftsmanship of dramatic expressions among other components. They have highlighted several textual features in Sama's *Mukunda Indira* and Tiwari's *Sahanshila Sushila*. They point out that these plays carry elements from multiple conventions of dramaturgy: Sanskrit, Parsi and Western,

introduced during the colonial period in India. Elaborating the dramaturgy Sama was wrestling with while he created a new one, Nepali drama critic Keshavprasad Upadhyaya observes: “Sama’s plays consist of songs and ghazal, music and dance among others, the popular dramatic devices of the time. They contain free verse and scenes of conflict, dramatic devices he borrowed from Shakespeare’s dramaturgy. Finally, his plays also contain prose that one encounters in Sanskrit plays” (2056BS² 79). Out of amalgamation of these dramatic devices of diverse origins, Sama creates a uniquely new Nepali drama in the late 1930s. Upadhyaya’s observation on Sama’s plays highlights a common experience that every new form of dramaturgy carries some elements from earlier forms in use. This also means theatrics need to be defined and explained with reference to temporally and spatially available styles and forms of expression. Upadhyaya makes a similar observation about Tiwari’s dramaturgy: “Tiwari too fuses elements of theatrics which were in use in Parsi theatre popular in Kathmandu, as his plays are full of songs and ghazal, music and dance. He also knits dialogues in such a way that one takes them as elements from social plays. Out of such amalgamation, Tiwari too invents his own style” (2056BS 140).

Parsi theatre was nomenclature of performance that included characters from fairy tales and supernatural tales from Hindu and Muslim worldviews, flowery Urdu and Hindi mixed language, colorful curtains, live music, songs, dance and extravagant movements. Sama and Tiwari employed selected elements from the convention of dramaturgy and theatrics available to both. In contrast, Rimal, who had appeared few years later after Sama and Tiwari adopted new form that contains several elements different from the dramaturgy practiced earlier. Pointing out this shift GP Rimal made, Upadhyaya remarks: “In *Masan* there is no song, no narrator, no music and dance, but pure modern prose” (2059BS 176). Since Sama, Tiwari and GP Rimal were writing at times when modern Nepali dramaturgy was in a process of emerging, their literary styles such as free verse and day to day conversational dialogues were marked

² Since most of the published sources used in this paper follow the Bikram Sambat (BS) calendar, it is consistently abbreviated as BS throughout. This practice enables us to historicize our analysis within the Nepali context, where Bikram Sambat is the standard calendrical system.

recognizable departures from a whole gamut of expressions made in flowery language that songs and ghazals used, and extravaganzas the musicians and dancers created.

The dramaturgy practiced in the Parsi theatre was hybrid in nature as it used Urdu, Hindi and Nepali expressions. Filled with stereotyped characters from the world of fairy tales and supernatural, plays written for this kind of theatre are critiqued to have nothing to address contemporary social problems. Nepali drama critics appreciate the departures Sama and his generation created at the level of characters, language and social themes. While doing so, these playwrights discovered their distinctive individual style. Sama's plays project "aspiration for social reformation", Tiwari idealizes social values and GP Rimal presents characters who deny going with the norms (Bhandari 356). While Bhandari points out the innovative elements in their plays, Acharya and Gairhe observe that their plays also include elements from conventional dramaturgy. They point out that Tiwari's women characters resemble the ones found in the plays written for Parsi theatre as they too are found interacting in single dimension. Tiwari's women characters can roughly be divided into "chaste" and "unchaste" (99). On the other hand, the prose that Tiwari provides to his characters are day to day by its nature.: "best modern Nepali" filled with "natural expressions" (174), they remark.

As members of the generation that nurtured a social anxiety of reforming existing feudal conservative Nepali society, these playwrights were aware of political developments that would bring the autocratic Rana regime to its end. They also shared certain parameters of looking into male and female responsibilities in changing contexts. Leading modern critic, Devi Sharma makes the following important observation about the take Sama makes in the play: "Male protagonists in Sama's plays especially in those which deal with women's issues are often found to be disloyal, but they are brought to a right moral track by female counterparts" (150). Indira in this play remains morally grounded while Mukunda goes wayward. The later gets his attitudes on sex and marriage reformed in the course of play. Following the similar line of critical approach, other critics have projected Indira and Sushila, the leading characters in *Mukunda Indira* and *Sahanshila Sushila* respectively as literary representatives of Nepali women in general: "Indira can be taken as the best literary representation of ideals which women were supposed to live in real society during the time" (17) and Sushila "affirms the canon, the patriarchal script

without questioning it” (23) and Helen from *Masan* challenges “patriarchal psycho social order” (29), observes Nandamaya Nakarmi. Sama is often praised for heralding styles of expressions having poetic magnitude. Siddhicharan Shrestha, the famous modern poet, also a contemporary to Sama regards Sama as “successful user of free verse and modern Nepali prose” (4). Using free verse at times when writers preferred to compose in classical metrical patterns was a daunting task. Sama was one such adventurer who would be making a history in the day to come. Elaborating the literary versatility of Sama, literary critic Rajendra Subedi states: “Often, Sama plays with *sabhanga* and *abhanga* i.e. words spelled correctly as well as those deliberately misspelled in order to create humor and fun” (180), and other time Sama breaks familiar words into two or three in order to entertain, confuse and bring character to life (181). Subedi’s extensive reading of Sama’s literary style establishes Sama as a writer more than an artist working with his fellow artists. Critics cited above definitely point out several devices Sama along with other two playwrights shared with the existing conventions as well as departure each of them did while carving out dramaturgy of his own making. But much can also be learned about these playwrights and their dramaturgy by (a) locating them to the socio-aesthetic contexts of the period, and (by) interpreting their dramatic texts as minefields for discovering the prevalence of cross-dressing theatrics. Doing it defines cross-dressing theatrics as one of the major forces behind the making of modern Nepali theatre.

Theatrics of Cross-dressing

By its nature, theatrics that employed cross-dressing, songs and music among others did bring related talents together. From actors to song composers, curtain designers to musicians, dancers to writers among other co-creators, all found themselves being engaged with the medium theatre. Thakurnath Rimal learnt to compose songs mainly for the group that Ratnadas Prakash belonged to reports: “They needed new songs for that year’s performance too. Bajirman and Ratnadas arrived at my home at nine in the morning. They expected me to provide songs of the same quality that I had written the year before, and my songs had enabled them to bag the prize” (6-7). Thakurnath Rimal carved out his niche gradually and his songs were provided their performances success. Though he complains for not including his name in the gramophone recordings of the songs, he accepts that theatre creators like Bajirman and Ratnadas Prakash

motivated persons like him to compose songs. His booklet on Prakash mentions helps one understand the intensity that song writers, musicians and theatre artists would work with. Songs would be written by listening to the need and understanding the trend of the time and so on.

Sama was employed as a drama teacher in the Darbar High school, and being the son of ruling family he had greater opportunity to mobilize resources. *Mukunda India* staged in the school is credited for introducing lighter scenery and realistic acting to the stage. Sama definitely could not have performed such innovative work single handedly, and students too were needed to be trained to act. This makes one realise that a collective force that must have gone in the making of the performance. Devendraraj Upadhyaya, a student of Sama in Darbar High School as well as someone who was cast in the premier production of *Mukunda Indira* in 1938 recalls the versatile personality Sama had. Born in ruling Rana family, a military official of significant reputation, Sama had surprised many by choosing teaching as his profession. On top of that he set out to compose Nepali poems and plays. He recounts the experience of being a student of Sama who had cast him in the performance:

I had known Sama not only as a teacher but also a drama teacher. He shared his plan of staging a play that he had just finished composing. Girls were not allowed to perform on stage during those days. This was why boys had to perform all kinds of female roles from mature women to young girl. He asked Kalanath Adhikari to play the role of young girl, I was approached to play a role of middle aged woman and Shankar Lamichhane (the famous essayist) was selected for the role of an old lady. Sama himself taught us acting, and ran sessions on acting methods. (15)

Darbar High School was the place where aspiring artist students would gather, and the only available modern public sphere, and Sama was directly involved in expanding that sphere. Sama's play was received as a major intervention into the existing theatre practices by critics and historians. Reporting the historical performances that took place in 1938, the famous literary journal of the time, *Sharada* in its editorial praises: "This performance by the students of Darbar High School under the direction of Capt. Sama was well received. The audience watched all the shows enthusiastically. The performance was very impactful. Entirely new

shared by Upadhyaya and *Sharada* is very significant. Since the play is credited for showcasing modern theatrics by the standard of the time, it has often been appreciated for setting the trend. Little attention is paid to locate the collective energy spent on bringing the play to the public. Cross-dressing mode of theatrics seems a forgotten topic.

Sama, the grandson of Dambar Shamsheer Rana, the first person to start modern theatre in Kathmandu, is sure to have been familiar with theatrics that employed cross-dressing mode of representation. Moreover, as a person exposed to theatrics he is sure to have developed passion for watching performances staged by famous artists of the time. Given the historical fact that every major Rana palace among, one and half of dozen of them built in the Valley by the 1920s, Sama is sure to have watched performances staged inside them. Since Sama was vocal and public figure, he too must have been familiar with maestros who would train aspiring artists to learn cross-dressing mode of acting among other required theatrics. Needless to say, that cross-dressing mode of representation was part of popular performance culture of the period. A handsome looking Ratnadas Prakash (1913-1992), someone who had earned fame through performing female roles in plays catered for Kathmandu-based audience during 1930s and 1940s narrates the scale of popularity he had achieved: “I was in my early teens those years. I had already been a popular singer, dancer and actor. Attracted by my talents and beauty, the same group of Muslim Nepalis from Asan area hired me. This group was led by Mir Sahab Ahmad Shah and Mohammad Miya” (92).

Prakash’s this piece of experience reveals two important message: there did exist certain theatre groups which were more popular and prestigious than others. Second message is that individual artist known for his talent would be noticed and hired by the group that looked for making profit. And the last but important message that these artists of Muslim origin belonged to the *gharana* or family of musicians and dancers who had migrated from Lucknow in the post-1856 political context. These artists had created certain a creative force both within the Rana palaces and beyond. Prakash’s popularity did increase across social sphere as his father was a cook in the British residency, and as a boy he would be invited to sing and dance in the programs organized for the guests, Thakurnath Rimal’s booklet mentions. He had become a famous artist among the British and their people. Prakash was already recognized among the audience of elite families. He stood tall and remained

resourceful. No doubt, he was a talent and lived by it throughout his career.

Prakash shares his experience that he had performed many plays for the audience in the palaces and general public. Among many plays performed in Ranas' palaces, he recalls a particular female character named Jarina. The play was staged in the palace of Juddha Shamsher Rana, the then prime minister (1932-1945): "I had played the role of *Jarina*, the leading woman character in the play *Jarina*. The beauty I had managed to exhibit probably might have enchanted Sama that he along with his officers waited at the backstage, and shared me a joke that even the Prime Minister himself wanted to know if I was a real girl or a mere boy artist. He inquired many things about me" (96). Prakash was in his mid-teens then and had already achieved popularity. His acting style and cross-dressing talents reached to a greater height in later years. Ratnadas and his team became the emblem of success in theatre. Abhi Subedi, someone who knew Ratnadas closely, shares the following experience that the later would recount with him time and again: "I was struck by one of his narratives. Reminiscing an event after the successful show of a play, he said, king Tribhuvan called him. Still gaudily dressed as a woman character in a Parsi play, and he heard the king joking, "you look very beautiful. If you were a girl, I would have married you". He told me many stories like that one" (91). Cross-dressing artists represented by Prakash had dominated the scene. Successful artists would be in contact with elite audiences. Since every Rana palace had sophisticated stage, such artists knew their audience sphere, and could develop strategies accordingly.

Prakash and others' rise had taken place at times when the rise of Sama, the first modern theatre director and playwright was taking place. Sama's personality, talent and resourcefulness could cast shadow over public sphere that catered modern forms of expressions whereas the artists like Prakash were popular. The following anecdote reveals that meeting between the popularly known theatre talent who worked for Parsi theatre and the rise of modern Nepali theatre did take place sometime in 1938:

It was the year 1938. I had already become a popular star among the audience. *Salima Begum*, the play I had appeared in had become very popular that year among the Ranas. Sama's students in Durbar High School had staged *Mukunda Indira* the same year. Every successful theatre group would request to allow its

performance be staged in the recently built Janasewa Hall, the first modern theatre that stood at the center of New Road then. We too had requested for the show. Perhaps Sama too had requested for the same. But the prime minister allowed our *Salima Begum* which had already been staged at the famous theatre in Singha Darbar to be shown at this newly opened theatre at New Road. (Prakash 96)

Interestingly, Sama someone trying to introduce new mode of dramaturgy and theatrics was unknowingly making competition with the ones who practiced the popular and conventional theatrics and dramaturgy. Himself an admirer of artist like Ratnadas Prakash, Sama is reported to have met and congratulated the former on many shows. Prakash recalls one of the meetings: “In *Salima Begum* I had played a role of a lover boy of Salima. Sama too had come to watch our show. Sama was carried away by my performance, and praised great many things about me” (97). This meeting between the artist known for cross-dressing and the playwright who was full of plots and characters of modern plays in his mind is meaningful. Moreover, Prakash as an established artist along with his team members could cast greater impact on authority whereas Sama had to assure the autocratic Rana regime and general public that plays written in modern Nepali too are aesthetic subjects of national importance.

Other than Prakash

Ratnadas Prakash’s popularity convinces his readers that there did exist a rich repertoire of cross-dressing based theatrics in Kathmandu. But definitely he was not the only talent. Prachanda Malla mentions several others known for their Cross-dressing acts and talent available: Kanchhabuddha Vajracharya (Teuda), Ratna Udas (Asan), Ashakaji (Asan, Balkumari), Daulatbikram Bista (Baneshwar) and Chakra Shrestha (Indrachok) among half a dozen more artists (2066BS¹ 99). Hari Prasad Rimal was another versatile artist who belonged to a family and class that had easy access to palaces and theatre resources. Though Rimal did not appear in cross-dressing roles, he had to synchronize his skills along with the one that his fellow artists on cross dress attire would display on stage. In one of the interviews with Raman Ghimire, he shares how cross-dressed actors made him improvise his skills on stage. In one performance, Pushpa Nepali on cross dressed role had his hair fallen, as the lover boy HP Rimal had to manage the scene in a very subtle manner to control the audience.

Commenting on his works, Ghimire passes the remark “Hari Prasad Rimal played male role all the time. Pushpa Nepali, Nir Bikram Pyasi and Daulat Bikram Bista were some of the popular artists who had acted female role alongside Rimal” (23). One of the active members of Gauri Shankar Natya Samaha, the historically significant theatre group membered by GP Rimal and other talents was a mover and shaker force in the Kathmandu based modern theatre. Since both of them were vocal and resourceful comparatively, Prakash and GP Rimal grabbed job at the recently opened Radio Nepal in the early 1950s. They also managed to record their songs in the recording company, and also bagged important official posts and awards.

Many women artists worked in Ranas’ palaces as maid for decades, and were also trained to perform on stage. Over the years, some of them emerged as trainers. Among such women trainers one was Krishna Maiya: “A resident from Naindol area, but employed in the Rana palace she acted as well as trained artists to do so” (Malla 2038BS 59). Women artists worked in the same palace with more or less similar kind of people and trainers, chances were high that women artists too emerged as influencer trainers. Sama narrates that in the theatre that his grandfather Dambar Shamsheer ran and managed, there were several girls and women. Sama mentions Basanti, another woman artist, who had managed to carve out her position as a theatre trainer: “Basanti was one of the leading artists. As junior artist she had acted in many performance. But as senior artist she started training artists, and was known as “Lalaji” in later years. Her talent was recognized as superior to many male teachers” (2054BS 107-109). Hushnapadi was another female artist who was exploited by theatre director, Sama’s own grandfather. Sama exposes it in the autobiography.

The brochure of *Mukunda Indira* distributed during the performance in 1938 mentions a list of male artists appearing as female characters on the stage. Boys appearing as women character were Shubabir Pande as Dhanamati, Ramkeshari Basnet as Indira, the leading character, and Rajamati by Krishna Prasad Timalsina among others. Upon reading the play, one finds that women characters appear in eleven scenes in the play. Out of these scenes, Indira appears nine times. She appears once in the first act, four times in the third act, two times in fourth act and one time in the fifth act. Similarly, the brochure distributed during the first production of *Sahanshila Sushila* at Judhyodaya Public High School mentions that the leading character Sushila was performed by Damodar Prasad or Puspa Lal

Shrestha, the founding president of Nepal Communist Party in Nepal, Juneli and the dancing girl was acted by Sundar Bahadur, Batuli by Jivanlal Satyal and Makhana by Ram Prasad among others. Women characters appear in all scenes of the first and the second act and in five out of six scenes in the third act. Sushila appears twice in the first, thrice in the second and four times in the third act. This makes one realize that greater attention was paid to the artists who appear on cross dress, as their role and skills mattered in bringing the performance to the level of shared message. Since students and Sama alone could not achieve such goal, thus hiring of talents for crossdressing based theatrics was inevitable.

The year 2004BS (1947 AD) marked a turning point in the history of modern theatre in Nepal. This was the year when HP Rimal and his theatre group members had written to Padma Shamsher JBR (1945-1948), the then Prime Minister to permit them to cast female artist on stage. Soon the permission was granted, Rimal and his team set out to stage a recently released Hindi movie "Ratan" into Nepali medium. It was this performance that brought Nepali women artists on the stage that general public watched. The first women artists to be seen on this occasion were Buddhidevi and Chunidevi" (Upadhyay 2059BS 233). GP Rimal had just finished writing *Masan* by then leaving one conjecture whether he knew that women artists would be allowed to appear on stage sometime very soon or he had already in mind some male artists who would be performing women characters realistic manner. In either case, *Masan* has become a text written at times when cross-dressing mode of representation had reached its climax, and was about to let itself disappear into oblivion within some years. "This year is historical in the field of Nepali theatre as women artists appear on the stage in public for the first time. It has motivated Nepali society. This editorial column is a proof" (330). Though this review editorial of the famous *Sharada* literary magazine criticizes the content of the play for not being original, for being a mere translation of a popular Hindi cinema, the play is sure to have become the news among public. The editorial discourages artists from carrying out such easy work. But no matter how popular or non-literary the play was, the very coming of women artists on stage was a shift. Needless to say that Cross-dressing based theatrics did remain in practice for more years till the newly established Royal Nepal Academy hired female artists.

Behind the Scenes

Bir Shamsher's (1885-1901) reign seems very significant from the perspective of rise of cross-dressing based theatrics in Kathmandu. Artists migrated from Lucknow had already created a force here in Kathmandu by the end of nineteenth century. They had trained and mobilized talents needed to stage plays. Bir Shamsher provided space for these talents to stage their performances. On top of that Dambar Shamsher, the first person to have access to learn modern theatrics and photography in Calcutta in the early 1890s was one of the plotters who had helped Bir Shamsher come into power by assassinating Ranodhip Shamsher, the then prime minister (1877-1885), one of their uncles. The rise of Dambar Shamsher as a theatre creator paved the way for many similar talents to visit Calcutta, get in contact with theatre creators there and bring skills and human as well as non-human resources to the capital Valley. Another talent who provided dynamism to the existing theatre practices in the first decade of twentieth century in Kathmandu was Manikman Tuladhar. He was also exposed to the theatrics available in the then Calcutta, and he brought the same to Kathmandu. The popular play *Indarsabha* had set a trend then in Calcutta and other parts of India, and the theatrics the play carried marked a standard of the theatre of the time. He staged it during the Gaijatra that the public watched for seven days. Soon the performance earned popularity. The palaces also invited his group to stage it. Since the performance was well received, Tuladhar wanted it to be staged for general public by selling tickets in 1905. But the then authority did not allow. Prachanda Malla highlighting Tuladhar's theatrics writes: "His theatre employed a very powerful theatrics. Their curtains would be very colorful. The elegantly colored curtain bearing all kinds of scenes provided their performance certain grandeur. Fire, rain, storm and variety of other effects quenched the thirst for visualities the audience would arrive" (2066BS 95-96). Since plays staged with such extravaganzas appealed the public, artists on the dress of women characters might have provided extra thrill to the audience.

Historians have pointed that the Rana palaces would employ musicians and dancers, trainers and aspiring ones whom they noticed in public. The elites and the court by their very nature promoted arts of their favorite. Ayodhyaprasad Mishra was a very well-known musician, Nanakprasad Mishra was song composer and dance trainer, and he worked at Narayanhiti Palace, and so did Balaprasad Sharma and Gangadatta

Parajuli (Malla 2066BS 96-98). Bajirman, Ustad Badri, Mahommad Miya, Mir Saheb and Bekha Narayan Maharjan were other renown contributors in the making of theatre of the time. Pushpa Shamsher, the son of Gopi Shamsher too had access to the world of theatre in Calcutta by his mid-teens. He was in friendly contact with theatre creators of Calcutta (Malla 2038 v.s 60). By the 1930s, over one and half a dozen Rana employed artists for entertaining performances. It estimated that fifty to sixty theatre groups would perform plays during the Gaijatra festival. Their performance would last no more than seven days per the rule. All of them would hire the best actors appearing on the role of women (Malla 2071BS 71). Since there would be competition among theatre groups, and artists wanted to have mastery over the medium they worked on, it was natural that they needed trainers and experts time and again. This could be one of the reasons why local theatre practitioners developed professional relationship with Calcutta-based theatre artists. Given to the relationship established by Dambar Shamsher in 1890s and Manikman Tuladhar in 1900s, and Pushpa Shamsher in later years, the professional trainers from Calcutta would receive invitation to visit Kathmandu. Malla mentions that artists belonging to Corinthian theatre from Calcutta would train artists here time and again. Other trainers from Calcutta included Shankar and Mohan had visited Kathmandu (2038BS 56).

Historians have written that the 1890s was the decade that saw the elite Ranas taking investing money they had managed to exploit at home in the share market of Calcutta. Ludwig Stiller critiques “members of the Rana family tried to improve their own on the Calcutta market” and Ranas’ “investment in the Calcutta market increased” (129). Given such socioeconomic connection between the elite Ranas and the modern market driven world of Calcutta, it was natural that Pushpa Shamsher someone who practiced theatre in Kathmandu would invite theatre trainers: “Pushpa Shamsher was such a resourceful person who linked theatre of Kathmandu with the one in Calcutta” (Malla 2038BS 59). This Calcutta connection unfolds the important social energy that theatre artists in Kathmandu nurtured a culture of performing on stage, and Cross-dressing based theatrics was an established artistic practice. Artists would think of delivering refined acting that included Cross-dressing mode of representation of female characters too.

Cross-dressing as Social Energy

Stephen Greenblatt states that authors bringing all kinds of stories and cultural practices the authors and readers among other makers of public sphere are part of too disappear into oblivion. But their literary or artistic works keep carrying “social energy” that had made all co-performers to execute that particular cultural practice. He points out the importance of such creations for bearing the “initially encoded” marks. Since such texts become available to readers and audience across times (Greenblatt 1988, 6), they carry clues for people to open up the cultural practice that had existed in the past. Based on this observation put by Greenblatt, one can analyze the importance of cross-dressing based theatrics popular in the past in Kathmandu then disappeared over the time but are found embedded in dramatic texts to be discussed at present moment.

Greenblatt reads William Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* as ‘social energy’ and states that the play “appeals to the body and in particular to sexuality as the heart of its theatrical magic”. The cross-dressing journey that the characters go through in the play affirms the belief that “sexuality is itself a network of historically contingent figures that constitute the culture’s categorical understanding of erotic experience” and the characters “function as modes of translation between distinct social discourses, channels through which the shared commotion of sexual excitement circulates” (1988, 86-87). Greenblatt shares the message that characters attired in Cross-dressing journey themselves are ‘shared message’. People observe social scripts being performed in costumes, expressions and movements on stage.

Cross-dressing-based theatrics include costumes, music, movement and whole gamut of make belief which do pulsate in dramatic texts available to people across times. Theatrics originate with a “fresh relationship with an audience” and artists set out “design the scenery, costumes, and lights and write the music it requires”, and “the discovery of the play’s style” (Cattaneo 12) becomes a possibility. Cattaneo’s observation on this side of theatrics of the renaissance London make one conjecture about the creative engagement artists and investors needed to make with creations of costumes. Since cross-dressing was the dominant mode and manner of representation of women characters and the plays written contained female characters in number, dress occupied a prominent

position in the theatre during renaissance London. Robert I. Lublin elaborates this situation or social practice further: “since all of the actors on the Shakespearean stage were male, their characters’ sex or gender resulted overwhelmingly from the clothes they wore. Juliet’s feminine beauty differed from Romeo’s masculine attractiveness only because the costumes they wore made it so” (01). Given the architecture of the Globe, one can further conjecture that audience would find costumes the friendliest way of comprehending the character. Since women characters from diverse social sections appeared on stage, each of them required costumes true to their social positioning. Cross-dressing definitely provided imaginative space to dress semiotics that further demanded involvement of minds and money. This further extended the business too: “Theatrical apparel typically represented the single largest financial investment made by playing companies, often costing more than scripts or even the playhouses themselves” (Lublin 02). Above discussion further suggests that cross-dressing based theatre too is a complex aesthetic and economic issue to be taken into consideration in the study of dramaturgy and theatrics of the period. Talking about it brings social imaginings of the time to live again.

Cross-dressed, male artists used socially agreed semiotics and expressions on the stage. They let the conventions of gender practice appear on stage. Pointing out the decisive role that conventions, for that matter, patriarchal script of gender normativity does play, Judith Butler opines “individual ways of doing one’s gender” do not remain “fully individual matter” as it is done “in accord with certain sanctions and proscriptions” (525). Cross-dressed male artists did carry socially practiced habits and social nuances to the stage. They let collective agreement on gender issues pass through their expressions and appearances on stage. Cross-dressed artists also bring story of women going through ups and downs in life, theatrics they create and are part of definitely do project “struggle, resistance, and subversion” of women going through “gendered patriarchal domination” (Cressy 438-439). Cross-dressing based theatrics of the bygone time enclosed women’s issues, and punctuated the very hegemony that patriarchal superiority did function by. This mode of representation brought out “*fictional* female characters portrayed by *non-fictional* male actors”, it became “male interpretation of the female performance of the feminine gender category” (Haberstroh 7), and while becoming so, the patriarchal mode and manner

of representation also got exemplified itself in its changed and continuity state of order.

Above mentioned critics' views on cross-dressing based theatrics are helpful to comprehend the role such theatrics had played role in articulating modern ideas in Nepal. Cross-dressing based representation in South Asia, mainly in colonial India, for that matter, in Nepal as well did pave the way for "respectable image of "woman"" for "both men and women". "This was a representation that, even attached to the male body, bespoke modernity" (Hansen 140). Cathryn Hansen observes that the rise of modern theatre in subcontinent emerged with its cross-dressing avatar. With it, the creators mainly the males defined themselves as change seekers, and women found themselves becoming topics of discussion in public. Such literary or artistic adventure by its very nature "functions without regard for a sharp distinction between literature and social life. It invariably crosses the boundaries between the of literary characters, the shaping of one's own identity, the experience of being molded by forces outside one's control, the attempt to fashion other selves" (Greenblatt 1980, 03). It became inseparable either male artists on female clothes were bringing female on stage or female issues reached to the stage through male body. In either case, the message that is shown or shared is the need of liberation for women, and the males too carried the social anxiety of letting women be visible in arts and politics and among other social issues of the day.

Texts as Sites of Cross-dressing Theatrics

Given the dramaturgy of *Mukunda Indira* and *Sahanshila Sushila* that is full of ghazal songs, and dances, one can conjecture that artists performing female roles needed to master over singing and dancing along with carving out expressions and speeches of feminine order. Interestingly, such unit of performances functioned as source of enticement and attention for leading male characters, Mukunda, Jwaisaheb and his friends in the plays. On top of that leading female roles bring transformation in the life of male characters. This further would also mean anyone performing female roles needed to have greater skills and talent of acting such roles. A journey to the role, no doubt, required costumes; and along with it, it also needed voice, movement and expression, a whole gamut of feminine expression the audience were/are used to. And Cross-dressing was an established trend, artists known for staging such roles, and trainers needed

were reachable. This was one of the main reasons why playwrights did not hesitate from creating female characters on roles of diverse magnitude. Males artist cast in the role of Indira, the leading female character in the first modern play needed to be trained meticulously. Trainers needed to train artists how to speak, walk and behave according to the role. Both *Mukunda Indira* and *Sahanshila Sushila* are full of episodes when female characters either occupy entire scene or remain co-sharer on the stage. This means to say that cross-dressing remains visible throughout the performance. Indira's long conversation with Bhavadeva, the leading male character, her appearance with her husband Mukunda in several scenes put demand upon the artist keep on sustaining the make belief for a longer span of time during the performance. Indira shows readiness to take action. Seen through dramaturg's perspective of the period, Cross-dressing was not obstacle in creating women character on the stage. Cross-dressing was neither received as minor practice since major percentage of the performance would be occupied or led by artists on Cross-dressing. Indira takes out a knife to attack Mukunda disguised as a local Romeo who tries to abuse her. Mukunda's manipulative talent is countered by Indira's grounded chastity. Disguised as a local Romeo, Mukunda has no option but to surrender to his wife Indira, and then finally return to a familial world forever.

Played by Ramkeshar Basnet, one of the talented male students of Darbar High School, the piece of acting needed to create Indira sets creative challenges ahead. What is validated through Indira's role acted out in cross dressed form of representation here is not individual trait of this character but general social values that Nepali women remain chaste to their husband. Given the nature of dramaturgy and theatre direction as well as acting that the climax scene or moments need to be carefully executed and communicated well to the audience, this particular scene when Indira is about to kill her own husband appearing in a disguised womanizer is a very telling from the perspective of cross-dressing based theatrics as well. Theatrics employed at this climactic scene definitely remain one of the most striking forces during the performance. Since they were written to be staged for the immediate audience, and live performance by its nature bound to be temporal, Sama's trust on cross-dressing mode of acting seems very firm as he provides dramatic space to Indira without any hesitation. The cause behind this trust was the availability of actors trained in cross-dressing theatrics during the years.

Tiwari's *Sahanshila Sushila* contains several dramatic scenes when Sushila, the leading and other minor women characters appear on stage several times. Acted by Damodar Prasad/Pushplal Shrestha both talented students of JP High School, Sushila is often taken as the emblem of tolerance. A Hindu married woman needs to have tolerance unlimited. This message the play shares needed to be executed and shared through cross-dressing mode of acting. During the performance, her life goes through a dramatic change. Tortured at home, she is kicked out at night and is forced to spend night in the street. She works as a domestic servant. Finally, she returns home as a respectable woman and mother. Unlike other male characters, whose life remain more or less the same, Sushila's is the most dramatic one. This character no matter how conservative she may sound to feminist and other liberal critics now, helps one to realize the way cross-dressing theatrics would be discussed, rehearsed and finally performed and disseminated in the period.

Batuli in the play is a minor woman character. She handles two males, Sete and Gore, her husband and lover respectively. Caught in a single bedroom of her house, she handles the situation to her favor. Seen from the perspective of acting, in the scene a cross dressed male artist deals with two different roles played by two different male artists in a very comfortable manner. Tired Sete in the play sleeps on the bed without any iota of knowledge about her wife's sweetheart lying under it (Act I Scene VI). The scene is designed to create entertainment in the play. Batuli is presented as anti-thesis to Sushila, the chaste Hindu married woman per excellence. Belonging to an indigenous community, Batuli represents immoral values to the extreme. But the fact that this female character required male actor to come out in the public makes one speculate about the trust playwright had had on cross-dressing based representation. Whatever moral world the character Batuli might be the emblem of, seen through cross-dressing oriented theatrics she requires a superior piece of theatrics to reach out the public and handle the situation in appealing manner.

Masan is full of episodes with activities of women characters. Helen named as Yuwati and Naya Dulahi, the first and the second wife of Krishna respectively take the major percentage of space in the text, for that matter, the stage too. Moreover, the presence of maid and mother characters throughout the play add further density to women dominated theatrics in the play. Importantly, this play was written in 1946 when the

then Prime Minister Juddha Shamsheer was yet to allow theatre groups to employ female artists to act out female roles on stage for public as well. Ironically, Rimal and his *Masan*, often credited for heralding realism on stage especially in prose writing and character development, belonged to the era when cross-dressing based theatrics saw the rise of women on stage doing their own job. Paradoxically, *Masan*, was written with cross-dressing based theatrics in mind, but was performed after 1946 when women artists became a new force in modern Nepali theatre.

Conclusion

These plays by Sama, Tiwari and Rimal discussed above help one comprehend the pain and anxiety of female members of patriarchal society. Theatre artists' desire to stage women and their world represented the collective desire of recognizing women's liberation during the period. This desire to recognise women's identity was also partly critical understanding of being male members in existing patriarchal society. By writing about women's stories to be staged and shared among the general public, these playwrights dramatized the collective goal of the period. As attempts to question social issues, they shared the message that embodying women is not only understanding them but also bringing transformation in Nepali society. The audience as representatives of the society watched the male actors bringing women's issue out to the public. As comakers of the performance, they heard a call for empathetic relationship with women for the sake of opening better life and society for all. Women too need to be heard and provided space was the 'social anxieties' of the time. As shared message created in the nascent stage of modern Nepal, these plays carry the common aspiration of time, and can be taken as two sides of the same coin: society and literature. Cross dressed artists on the stage too were sharing the same message that they too are both male and female: two sides of the same coin. Thus, the cross-dressing mode of representation of social issues is/was also a shared medium of understanding suffering of each other. By bringing dramaturgy and theatrics of this order, modern writers addressed the troubles that the gender in Nepal had created. This was the spirit, and aspiration that modern Nepali plays did proceed with its cross-dressing.

It is concluded that cross-dressing mode of representation practiced in the first half of twentieth century in Kathmandu is a metaphor of feudal patriarchal social order that was trying to bring transformation within.

Instead of letting females express themselves on public and articulate their stories, the males invented or owned up extra job of becoming women to share the very social anxiety that they were mainly responsible for. By recognizing this mode of representation as dynamic aesthetic force of the time, the critics and historians can pay tribute to the artists as well as comprehend the real historical and aesthetic milieu that the modern form of dramaturgy had emerged from. Modern theatre in Nepal did not emerge with modern garbs at one go, it emerged through a slow process. Cross-dressing based theatrics need to be recognized as garbs put on by modern theatre in Nepal for a meaningful journey ahead in its beginning days.

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