



Soft Texts: Bhojpuri Songs and World Literature

In late 2020, the English translation by Gautam Chaubey of Kapil Pandey's 1977 Bhojpuri novel *Phūlsunghī* created a stir in the Indian press. The Bhojpuri region, straddling two states of contemporary northern India and southern Nepal, has a wonderfully rich, old and still vibrant tradition of orature, and the novel revolves about a famous Bhojpuri songwriter and a singer-courtesan and her patron in the late colonial period. Reviewers praised Chaubey's elegant translation for 'open[ing] up the local culture and tradition to a larger audience', and noted that although 'Bhojpuri culture has generated sociological and scholarly interest, its literary merit hasn't travelled as deeply into the Anglophone world'. A decade earlier, two lines from a Bhojpuri folksong sung by women featured in Amitav Ghosh's novel *A Sea of Poppies* (2008), the first tranche of his opium trilogy that successfully shows the entanglements of global trade, the British empire, oceanic geographies, and between the Bhojpur region, Bengal and Bombay in India, China, and the plantation islands/coolie colonies. But, this chapter asks, does Bhojpuri orature need to enter a novel in English in order to become part of/visible in world literature? Or can we use the world of Bhojpuri orature, encompassing epics, songs, theatre, live performances and printed chapbooks, and more recently cinema, TV channels, and digital music videos, to prise open the restrictive definition of literature in world literature (that which is 'read as literature', in David Damrosch's formulation)?

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