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# Soft Texts

## *World Literature, Circulation and Bhojpuri Songs*

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**Abstract**

David Damrosch's formulation of world literature has energized the field but struggles to include texts that circulate but are not "read as literature." This essay takes up the case of songs, and particularly Bhojpuri songs, and follows their trajectory of circulation and of linguistic adaptation to prise open this formulation and make space for songs and oral literature.

**Keywords**

world literature – orature – songs – Bhojpuri – circulation

"A work enters into world literature by a double process: first, by being read as literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin" – David Damrosch's elegant and pithy definition (*What is World Literature* 6) dramatically revitalized and opened up the field of world literature.[1] Other scholars have built on these insights and studied dif-

1 This chapter would not have been possible without the brilliant and extensive scholarship of the late scholar Catherine Servan-Schreiber, who devoted her life to the study of Bhojpuri orature and sadly passed away prematurely in November 2021. A longer version will appear in Marzagora and Orsini.

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ferent and *shifting* notions of world literature (Mani *Recoding*; Tihanov, Lounsbery and Djagalov) and the mechanisms and dynamics of literary circulation (Sapiro).

The idea that world literature is about printed *books, read* "as literature" has remained a foundation, however. For B. Venkat Mani, world literature involves *biblio*migrancy, the circulation and reception of printed books (*Recoding*), while Gisèle Sapiro's rigorous studies of translation flows rest on data about book translations. In one sweep, oral literature is excluded. World literature publications may gesture towards oral literature in their opening statements and introductions, Caroline Levine notes in "The Great Unwritten," but then quickly sideline it to concentrate on written genres, usually the novel. Words "spoken, sung, or performed as aesthetic events are considered to be external to the domain of print, and thus to the modes of circulation conventionally associated with the term 'world literature,'" Liz Gunner adds (116). "How then do we begin to rethink orality," she asks, "in order to bring about a model of world literature which is truer to the broad spectrum of verbal arts?" (116).

Gunner's answer, as with other scholars of African literatures, has been to conceive of texts – like the praise poem or the epics of *Sunjata* or Liyongo – across a range of languages, genres, and platforms. Oral texts circulate in oral, written, printed, audiovisual and digital form, often in several formats and on several scales at the same time, adapting themselves to new contexts, platforms, and audiences (Gunner; Barber; Vierke). While being verbally artful, they fulfil different functions – as ritual performances, community memories, oral histories, and so on – broadening and enriching our sense of what literature is and does.

Following this cue, this essay focuses on Bhojpuri songs to help prise open Damrosch's formulation of world literature as texts that are "read as literature." The portability and resilience of songs as carriers of aesthetic and affective value, combined with their adaptability to new multilingual and social contexts and musical innovations, require different frames of analysis from those of written and printed texts, their authors and circuits of circulation.

## 1 Songs as Literature

Songs are both acknowledged and disavowed as literature. In the chapter on songs in his recent book on *Poetry and its Others*, for example, Jahan Ramazani first points out the commonalities between poems and songs before arguing for their substantial differences. In other languages and traditions, this dis-

tinction applies less: Kabir's poems are songs (Hess), and so are the Swahili song–poems of Shaaban Robert and Sando Marteau (Rosenberg; Aiello and Gaudioso). Urdu poets working for the Bombay film industry consciously simplify their language, but their songs draw on the full range of poetic tropes (Coppola).

On the one hand, then, songs are poems set to music that draw upon the same pool of referents, images, tropes, and characters as poetry. On the other hand, text is only one element in a song alongside melody, rhythm, and voice. Many Bhojpuri songs, as we shall see, seem to work with the briefest textual hints: instead of whole texts we have resonant phrases or words (*dulhin* or bride, *roti* or bread, *chulha* or hearth, *kudari* or spade, etc.), instruments and melodies.

Wendy Doniger once distinguished between fluid texts, which are texts that can be and are changed in transmission, and fixed texts that cannot. Ratnakar Tripathy, who has studied contemporary commercial musical culture in northern India, speaks of "soft texts" and even looser evocations of text in song lyrics:

> The idea of the text I feel remains as indispensable as ever through its oral, printed and digital incarnations. By 'text' I mean here an original frame of meaning as a point of reference even if it's imaginary/imagined/posited. With various degrees of fluidity, portability and replicability [...]. I feel the phrases 'hard text' and 'soft text' should do for the interim with several in-betweens of course. [...] Incantatory lyrics sung loudly and danced with cut both ways – they drown the words but also highlight selected text.
>
> TRIPATHY, *Personal communication*[2]

This definition is very far from our usual literary understanding of a literary text as something that cannot be said in any other way. But resonant phrases, words, and melodies, this essay argues, characterize the worldly circulation of Bhojpuri songs across space and time, their resilience and adaptation as well as their compressed historicity. For this reason, this essay takes up the Trinidadian singer Sundar Popo's mixed-language 1970s hit "Phulourie Bina Chutney Kaise Bani" (How can you make *phulouri* without chutney?), recently revived

2 He adds: "The text remains important and melody/rhythm alone are never enough even for the grossest songs. The vulgarest songs are often the richest in metaphors [...]. But my ethnographic work in 2010 startled me for the great anxiety the lowliest singers expressed over the quality of their lyrics, many of them dreaming of a muse-lyricist who would write songs for them."

in the Hindi blockbuster film *Dabanng 2* (Fearless 2, 2012, dir. Arbaz Khan), as an unlikely, and consciously provocative, case.

## 2 Bhojpuri Orature

Bhojpuri is spoken across two states in India (eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar), in southern Nepal, and among the Bhojpuri diaspora. It has largely remained an oral and unofficial language, regionally and culturally important but giving way to Hindi in formal contexts. In fact, Bhojpuri has always coexisted in India or in the former plantation colonies in the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean with other languages, either Hindi, Creole and French or English, as part of a multilingual local (Orsini). In India, despite its large number of speakers, rich oral literature, and a century-long publishing history, Bhojpuri has struggled for recognition.[3]

At one end, Bhojpuri orature can be deemed part of world literature because of its rich tradition of oral epics (*gathas*), living repositories of cultural memory narrated by specialists or circulating as printed chapbooks (Servan-Schreiber *Chanteurs*). These count among the many regional and caste oral epics attested across South Asia (Blackburn et al.), part of a tapestry of oral epics that have already been accepted into world literature (Puchner et al.). But the world of Bhojpuri orature from northern India also encompasses songs, theatre, live performances, chapbooks, printed books, and more recently cinema, TV channels, and digital music videos.

Bhojpuri society mainly comprises martial, mercantile, pastoral and agricultural castes and is strongly patriarchal. Oral epics are associated with particular castes and typically revolve around migrant heroes or forbidden inter-caste or inter-clan romance and are recited and/or sung by men accompanied by a drum and string-instrument (*sarangi*). Songs, by contrast, are typically sung by women as part of everyday work or on ritual and festive occasions and cover a wide range of genres – there are grinding songs, wedding songs, spring, monsoon, and festival songs. As in other parts of South Asia, music and singing are considered auspicious, indeed necessary for auspicious events like weddings and births, but professional singers, particularly itinerant ones, are often low-caste and considered impure: celebrated during the performance for their artistry, they are nonetheless socially liminal (Butler Brown; Servan-Schreiber

3 See www.census2011.co.in/census/district/83-bhojpur.html. Despite movement agitating for its recognition in the 1960s and 1970s, Bhojpuri is yet to be recognized as an official language.

*Chanteurs*). Singing, and especially dancing, were and to some extent still are considered an illicit profession for women.

In colonial times the Bhojpur region became a centre of opium and sugarcane cultivation and large-scale labour migration, with traders and labourers travelling to jute mills in Calcutta and tea plantations in Assam. After the abolition of slavery in 1833, indentured Bhojpuri labourers or *girmitiya* crossed the Black Water, or *Kala Pani*, to work as in the plantation colonies of Mauritius (since 1830), Trinidad and Guyana (1845), Natal in South Africa (1860), and Fiji (1879). While the historiography of coolie migration has emphasized the deep trauma of oceanic crossing and its quasi-slavery conditions (Tinker), Servan-Schreiber (*Histoire*) has argued that pull factors and habits of migration and trade also played a role.

Even before indenture there was a strong tradition of Bhojpuri songs about exile and separation, with a wife singing about her longing (*biraha*) while her husband is away (*bides*), fighting or working. She "looks at the road" (i.e. waits) sitting on the rooftop and suffers because of loneliness, unfulfilled sexual desire, and humiliation at the hands of her mother- and sisters-in-law, and worries that her husband has been enticed by a rival wife (*sautin*) abroad. These topoi and structure of feeling recur across a range of song genres (*purbi, kajli, barahmasa, biraha*) – and single words like *biraha, sautin, bides* are enough to evoke the whole structure. Songs direct attention to her aching youthful body to express sexual tension; others point to fruit, vegetables, food items and birds to voice desire and signal the pleasures that the wife cannot have.

Another song genre, the *birha* (< *biraha*), associated with Ahir cattle-herders and milk producers who perform it with powerful voice projection, enjoyed considerable creativity, success, and circulation in performance. A *birha* that became very popular in Mauritius in the 1920s lamented the hard labour and "mirage" Mauritius had proved to for labourers (in Hindi *marich* means mirage):

> *idhar udhar* kan planté
> *bich men makai*
> *ek dari golmal to kiya*
> *to mila chamkai*
> *desh chhore bhaiya*
> *ai ai Mirichiya*
> *mar kudari, nich pachhari*
> *chal agari*
> *yebi Mirichya ke rit*
>
> SERVAN-SCHREIBER *Histoire* 100

Here, there we planted cane
and corn in the middle.
You mess up a single row
you get a good shining!
We left the country, brother,
and came to Marichiya
dig the spade, turn it round,
move ahead,
these are the ways of Marichiya

Note the (slight) use of Creole (*kan planté*) and the mention of the curved spade (*kudari*) as the labourer's tool that we'll find again in the Phulouri song.

Bhojpuri songs have existed and circulated on a growing number of platforms: in intimate or community settings, sung by women or by itinerant male singers; as part of folk theatrical performances or as competitions between "singing parties." In the 1880s, "a veritable market economy" of printed booklets grew around these genres, which circulated widely for a century through a vast network of itinerant peddlers (Servan-Schreiber *Chanteurs itinerants* and *Histoire* 55). Like the *literatura de cordel* in Brazil (Haurélio), these Bhojpuri chapbooks acted as textual aids supporting the consumption and circulation of orature. They illuminate a parallel system of production and circuit to that of books for an eager, often semiliterate, reading public that world literature studies tend to ignore. In Hindi films, Bhojpuri songs tend to signify either a subaltern sexual energy, often played on a stage by a professional dancer or "item number," or else homely tradition.[4] More recently, Bhojpuri songs have been part of an economy of live performances ("concerts") and audio cassettes in 1980s, and of VCDs since the 2000s, with professional singers performing and recording devotional and/or ribald songs (Manuel *Cassette Culture*). The large Bhojpuri diaspora also arguably sustained the development of a Bhojpuri film industry in Bombay from the 1960s, which seems to have peaked in the 1990s (Avjit Ghosh), and a vibrant subculture of Bhojpuri YouTube music channels – what Ratnakar Tripathy has called a "music mania" (Tripathy "Music Mania").

4 See e.g. Sharda Sinha singing "Pag pag mohe liye jaun tori balaiya" (My prayers will protect you at every step, lyrics by Asad Bhopali) in the superhit film *Mainne Pyar Kiya* (I've Loved, dir. Sooraj Barjatiya, 1989).

## 3 Bhojpuri Songs in the Diaspora

> la seule façon de garder notre lingue vivante, c'est par la musique
>
> RAVIN SOWAMBER to C. SERVAN-SCHREIBER *Histoire* 71

> you must have a tune and a story
>
> SUNDAR POPO

After their contract expired, indentured workers in Mauritius and other plantation colonies settled villages and bought plots of land. In Mauritius, by 1920 almost half of the cultivated land belonged to Indian families and Bhojpuri became a rural lingua franca (as opposed to Creole in the towns and coastal areas) spoken even by Chinese traders (Servan-Schreiber *Histoire* 71). In Mauritian villages, music and songs were a regular part of the *baithka* or "sitting," an important social and cultural institution, while women sang wedding songs at women-only *soirées* called *gamat* or *git gawai*. Professionally specialised repertoire became a collective heritage; oral epics like *Alha* were parcellised into songs, and some women's seasonal songs lost their natural referents in the new climate (96–97).

The fortunes of Bhojpuri in Mauritius waxed and waned over successive generations. In the 1930s, Bhojpuri lost ground to Creole and standard Hindi. Writers like Abhimanyu Unnuth (1937–2018), the most renowned Mauritian Indian author, chose standard Hindi for their poems, plays, and fiction. Yet Bhojpuri songs dot his historical novel *Lal Pasina* (Red Sweat, 1980), which claims to present the "authentic history" of indentured labourers, and work as authentifiers (Unnuth; Mani "Multilingual"). Bhojpuri regained value as a vehicle of popular mobilization on the road to independence (in 1968) and thanks to local cultural organizations. Chutney music catalyzed a Bhojpuri revival in the 1980s (Servan-Schreiber *Histoire* 78).

Trinidad was more distant from India, migration was more diversified, and there was greater language loss to Creole and English, so that "by the end of the 1960s [...] most Indians communicated with each other in English" (Mohamed 4). Only songs and religious practices preserved Bhojpuri and Hindi.

In both Mauritius and Trinidad, Bhojpuri songs survived and continued to circulate thanks to processes of adaptation and creolisation. In both cases, a movement from the wedding tent to the performance stage of the fête or the local talent competition led to the creolisation of music through encounters with Soca in Trinidad and Séga in Mauritius – both closer to African styles – to create danceable music. This spawned various sub-styles, from Chutney-Soca to Séga-Bollywood (Manuel *East Indian Music*; Servan-Schreiber *Histoire*).

Often very ribald female songs full of sexual innuendoes, earlier sung in the context of women-only wedding soirées, were reinvented as dance music with more instruments, professional male and (a few) female singers, and a "new body language" of dance in gender-mixed environments (Mohamed; Servan-Schreiber *Histoire*).

In terms of song texts, Bhojpuri lines and topoi were stitched with Creole in Mauritius and English in Trinidad. New topics were added to the older structures of feeling linked to love, marriage, family, and migration. These included tensions between city and rural life, jobs and unemployment, and a more localized and shared identity as Mauritians, signalled by local toponyms (in bold in the song below).

Migration, singer Roodraduth Pokhun suggested, was over. The *Pardesi* had arrived and had no desire to return:

> *Morisva dil mohela*
> *hind maha sagar ke, tara morisva,*
> *sab ke, dil mohela, hã hã dil mohela.* [...]
> *man ke rijhaveola,* ***pamplemu****s bagiya.*
> *acharaj* ***samarel*** *ke, sat rangi matiya.*
> *hĩya ake pardesi laute na khojela.*
> *morisva sabke dil mohela.*
>
> POKHUN 8

> *Mauritius enchants the heart*
> Mauritius, the star of the Indian Ocean,
> enchants every heart, yes, yes. [...]
> The garden of **Pamplemousses** delights the heart,
> the seven-colour earth of **Chamarel** astounds.
> Once here the Pardesi seeks no return,
> Mauritius enchants every heart.

The band Bhojpuri Boys sang of travels (*Dadi gail Angleterre, Angleterre ghume, la France ghume*, Grandma went to England, toured England, toured France) and new migrations (Servan-Schreiber *Histoire* 224–225). The bazaar or *bazariya* was no longer the stomping ground of the heroine's rival but of the heroine herself. And if in some songs the *bazariya* is still a dangerous place where one gets molested, the city, buses, and Fancy-Fair also become sites of excitement and romance:

*Fantifair*
*Fantifair mein gaili mama, dholl-puri bechatani*
*Ego chokri hamko dekhlan, dholl-puri bechal hogal*
*Mama bole mama – Hamro shaadi karadge na …*
*Fancy-Fair*

PHOOKUN "Fantifair" in SERVAN-SCHREIBER *Histoire* 171

I went to the Fancy-Fair, mama, to sell *dholl-puri,*
A girl looked at me, and all my snacks were sold.
I told mama – Do set my marriage up …

"Music is the only way we can keep our language alive," Catherine Servan-Schreiber was told in Mauritius (*Histoire* 225). Keeping Bhojpuri alive involved processes of musical and linguistic creolisation and of adaptation to new media platforms and new subjects. As a result, Bhojpuri texts became "softer," evoking familiar elements while registering historical, cultural, and linguistic change.

## 4 How Can You Have Phulouri without Chutney?

It is in this context of adaptation and creolisation that we need to read Trinidadian singer-songwriter Sundar Popo's 1970s "How Can you have Phulouri [a falafel-like fried snack made with pulse flour] without Chutney?" (*Phulouri bin chutney kaise bani*?), one of the first hit Chutney songs. In Chutney music, English became the primary language, while Soca rhythms and instruments were added to the music. Professional male singers like Sundar Popo (1943–2000) and female singers like Drupati Ramgunai became famous, and not just locally. After a deal between Moean Mohammed of Windsor Records in Trinidad and Rohit Records in the US, Sundar Popo became a household name in the Netherlands, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Mauritius and India (Ramnarine).

The refrain of the song is in Bhojpuri and probably "traditional." But it is only a fragment anchoring a song that positively delights in mixing references and languages. "At that time," writes Aisha Mohammed, it was inconceivable that "Indian music, and the Indian community, could retain 'Indianness' without an Indian language. Songs like Popo's 'Nana and Nani' or 'Phulourie bin chutney' offered a solution, though it was not recognized at the time. The use of familiar folk melodies, and Indian-style enunciation […] gave the songs an "Indian" sound while widening their appeal to non-Hindi speakers" (5).

Kaise bani, kaise bani,
phulourie bin chutney kaise bani REFRAIN

I went Sangre Grande to meet Lal Beharry
I pull out meh kudari and shave off de darhi[5]
Phulourie bina chutney kaise bani

Me and me dahling were flying in a plane,
de plane catch a-fiya and we fall inside de cane
Kaise bani …

I beatin' me drum when I singin' me song
the only tings a missin' is me bottle a rum.
Kaise bani …

Jack and Jill went up da hill
to fetch a pale of wota'
Jack fell down and broke 'is thumb
and Jill came tummlin' aftah
Little Jack Hahnah sit in a conah
eatin' his Christmas pie.
He put in his tumb an' pull out a plum
an' said, What a good boy am I.
Kaise bani …

When asked about the text ("In your song, "Phoulourie Bina Chutney", you have these nursery rhymes, "Jack and Jill went up the hill" and "Little Jack Horner sat in a corner", and then something about the cane fields. What's the meaning of that song?"), Sundar Popo downplayed it as nonsense:

> Well, it's just a chutney song. It don't carry great meaning. It's rhyme: 'Me and my darling was flying in a plane, the plane catch a fire and we fall inside the cane.' It brings many meanings and it's how you will interpret it.
>
> RAMNARINE 169

5 darhi, i.e. beard. This is what I heard after listening to the songs many times. Rajib Mohabir gives another text: "an' see a banki-dhari", (a person with a curved knife). When covered by a female playback singer in the Bhojpuri film "Bhaiya Dooj" (1985, dir. Qamar Narvi) and performed on stage by a duo of actors with sexually suggestive thrusting and grinding gestures, the female performer at this point clearly threatens the man with an imaginary weapon. In the version sung by Kanchan available on YouTube, the line changes to "and say about Shridhari."

Yet, as others have already noted, the nonsensical text is not so random after all. It contains familiar references to food (*phulouri* and chutney), which in Bhojpuri songs often carry sexual innuendoes; a reference to plantation labour through the sugarcane field and the hoe (*kudari*); a local toponym (Sangre Grande) an image of migration/mobility (the plane); a stereotype of Trinidadian songs (meh bottle ah rhum); and English nursery rhymes that speak of a basic (school?) contact with the language. In other words, by combining evocative textual fragments, the song expresses in a compressed and imaginative way the historical experience of Indian migrant labour in a musical language that is familiar but also understandable beyond the community.

Sundar Popo sang the song simply to a traditional rhythm accompanied by a shehnai-sounding clarinet and dholak and tabla drums (his father was an accomplished drummer in tassa ensembles). But when the Indian early pop husband-and-wife duo Babla and Kanchan, pioneers of disco accompaniment to other traditional forms like disco dandiya, toured Trinidad in the 1980s, they took up the song and made it more upbeat and danceable. They added a synthesiser and Kanchan sang in the high-pitched voice of Indian playback singers. Interestingly, the comments treads on YouTube make clear that these once novelty songs have themselves become collective memories and evoke in many listeners memories of family parties, festivities, and old records.

In 2012, the song became a hit once again in India thanks to the Bollywood blockbuster *Dabanng 2*, in which Salman Khan plays a small-town police officer of unorthodox means. Surrounded by criminals at a wedding celebration, he suddenly hears the song and cannot help twisting to the beat. The next thing we know, he is on stage, dancing and singing alongside the sexy female performer.[6] In *Dabanng 2* the song text is drastically curtailed and partly changed – the Trinidadian toponym of Sangre Grande, the sugarcane, and the *kudari* of plantation labour have disappeared. The couple falls from the airplane on fire onto a … train, a more familiar reference in India?[7] Performed in an Indian context, the Bhojpuri text becomes even more of an anchor, while the English lines recall the funny and suggestive code-mixing of many Bhojpuri songs (Kumar).

How can this song, however significant it may be as a cultural memory and however wide its circulation within and outside the regime of copyright, be "*read*", and "*as world literature*"?! Older Bhojpuri folk songs can surely be

6 The singers are Mamta Sharma and Wajid ("Kaise Bani Kaise Bani – The Chatni Song, *Dabanng 2*").

7 "Me and my darling were travelling on a plane, The plane catch fire and we fall inside a train" ("Kaise Bani Kaise Bani – The Chatni song").

more easily folded into world folklore, maybe even the political *birhas* as expressions of a postcolonial consciousness. But this contemporary dance number?

Here is where the arguments offered by Liz Gunner and Ratnakar Tripathy are instructive. Instead of whole texts, we have resonant phrases, even single words (*phulouri, kudari*) – what with Tripathy we may call "soft texts" or "even looser evocations of texts". Melodies, instruments and textual elements are recomposed to suit the new circumstances: in India and in the diaspora Bhojpuri songs are *both* folklore and heritage (manifested in community singing and printed song collections) *and* mixed-language songs-and-dance numbers, performed at concerts, inserted into films, and now available on YouTube. Tripathy's observations on how new song texts are created through reiteration and familiarity are useful: "The text, whether inherited, partly borrowed, reassembled or based on templates of text/melody/rhythm, *appeals to familiarity*. [...] I wish to emphasize the reiterative/referential part, whether textual, melodic or more rarely perhaps as rhythm." Enterprising artists mines "more and more from the traditional stocks [...] for new stuff." Tripathy concludes, "Yes, some forms do get left behind though it's difficult to claim that they will always remain so due to their inherent limitations (as music can easily break away from its traditional context a bit like griot)" (Personal communication).

## 5 Conclusions

> To provide a model of world literature that does not include orality is comparable to an act of self-amputation; it entails the excision of a huge field of human cultural endeavour.
>
> GUNNER 116

If we want to acknowledge orature as part of world literature, we need to start from its own forms of textuality, authorship, artistry, circulation, recognition and consecration. Gunner suggests that we consider the different modes of production and circulation of oral texts – ritual, live performance, radio, booklet, YouTube, etc. – among audiences "within different spheres or ecologies of literary practice" as "*co-existing* rather than *successive*" (122, 126). Following Gunner, I have argued that the Bhojpuri songs "exists through multiple practices, each of which sustains its presence in the modern world" (Gunner 122). The *baithka, gamat* wedding sessions, carnivals, fêtes, competitions, radio, YouTube, record and film companies, lyricists, musicians, studios, and so on have all contributed

to making songs like "Kaise Bani" circulate "worldwide." This is not a unified system, but rather a relay of institutions and agents catering to different publics, in which print may or may not be involved.

In the process, texts necessarily change and adapt, sometimes drastically. They get chopped up and partly replaced but, as Ratnakar Tripathy argues, the text, or its evocation, is still there – a soft text. Even these soft texts matter, and mean, a lot to their audiences, and even a nonsense song like "Kaise Bani" can be "read as world literature" as testament to the resilience and transformation that orature undergoes in order to survive and thrive, finding new audiences and new platforms over time. "Kaise Bani" by itself may not be recognizable as world literature but, as I have tried to argue, when we read it in the context of Bhojpuri orature, its history and transformations both in India, in the diaspora, and in the "significant geography" (Laachir, Marzagora and Orsini) formed by the enduring connections between the two, even the soft text and the music of this song reveal traces of this history and of the many actors involved.

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