

BOOK REVIEWS/INDIA

Francesca Orsini. *East of Delhi: Multilingual Literary History and World Literature*. Oxford University Press, 2023. Xix + 288 pages. Hardcover, \$115.00.

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In her phenomenal book, *East of Delhi: Multilingual Literary History and World Literature*, Francesca Orsini reassembles multiple texts and traces the various trajectories of their reception and rendition through the early modern period to unearth a multilingual history of North Indian literature. Her analysis of dialogic entanglement and disregard, recognition and forgetting within a vast range of local repertoires powerfully challenges monolingual literary historiography, offering readers a rich and layered engagement with local genres. Orsini shows that the idea of the world in discussions of world literature remains exclusive, shaped by a center-periphery bias. She applies Doreen B. Massey's concept of the "existence of contemporaneous pluralities" (Massey 2005) as a central idea to move beyond the exclusive idea of world literature, shaped by a center-periphery. Combining primary sources in Awadhi, Persian, Urdu, and Brajbhasha with an archive of literary histories and critical studies, Orsini creates an ethos of expansive inclusivity while demonstrating the intensive scholarly investment required to construct a multilingual literary history of a region.

By charting a multilingual history of the Awadh region—situated east of Delhi, the citadel of imperial power—Orsini offers a corrective to world literature by reconceptualizing the idea of textual circulation that has been central to it. She poses a provocative question: Can a literature be called world literature if it does not circulate beyond its region or is not translated? Through a reading of early modern multilingual literary spaces, Orsini exposes blind spots in the existing definition of world literature that relies on transnational circulation, often via formal translation into the languages of global power. In her intriguing methodology, the global-local and cosmopolitan-vernacular binaries dissolve.

Orsini identifies the Awadh region as Purab (the "east" in various local languages), and poetic fragments such as *paban calat purabiyā* ("the monsoon wind blows from the east") begin to resonate in my memory, intertwined with each other and drawing me to the core of her work. Orsini proposes a critical

engagement with what she calls “multiple stories and trajectories” of the “multilingual local” (51), where poetic and textual references move, are re-accented, or disappear according to the “tastes” of people in a “dialogic” formation—a Bakhtinian concept she adopts as her framework.

Rejecting colonial denominations, Orsini uses the local term *pūrab* to envision a new spatial concept for observing changes in language preference, genre mobility, and literary transmission between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries. The Awadh region, situated in the fertile Gangetic riparian plains and long traversed by trade routes between Bengal and Afghanistan, was dotted with *q’asbahs* (administrative units) and small towns that witnessed political-administrative shifts from the Sultanate to the Mughal period. Her literary cartography of this region, which experienced both the intensification of East India Company power and the decline of the Mughal Empire, probes the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of world literature via a regional lens.

In taking a spatial approach to world literature, Orsini positions multilingual Purab not as a fixed space but as a unified idea of a region that counters a static view produced in global narratives of the circulation of people, ideas, and artifacts. Her approach extends David Damrosch’s warning that any idea of the world—despite its claims of neutrality—is constructed from a particular perspective highlighting the persistent Eurocentric logic of “the technology of recognition” (Damrosch 2003, 76) in world literature discourses.

Orsini defines Purab as a “multilingual local,” an alternative model of worlding and literary circulation she describes as “significant geographies”—the culmination of an argument she has developed over the last two decades (Orsini 2015). Continuing that argument, “significant geographies” remain key to understanding how for “each text, story, individual, or group . . . the world actually consists of a number of crisscrossing geographies that are significant to *them*, whether these geographies are real or imaginative” (emphasis in original, 6). Here, Orsini critiques the use of Bourdieu’s (1993) idea of the “field” in defining world literature that invests a single value in the literary world-system or a few universal laws.

She develops this critique through a “thick description” of three genres: the long narrative tradition (*kathā*) in Awadhi (chapter 2), the devotional song repertoire of the *sants* (chapter 3), and the poetic biographical accounts or *tazkirah* (chapter 4). These readings show how texts are received or forgotten within the region in response to changing literary tastes. Orsini’s analysis spans scribal and oral renditions of the texts in Awadhi, Persian, Brajbhasha, and Urdu, tracing their circulation, overlap, or parallel growth, as well as the formation or loss of memory over decades and from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries.

In chapter 2, she brings together the varied modes of *kathā* circulation, focusing on Daud's *Chandayan* (1379) and later *kathās* such as Qutban's *Mrigavati*, Mir Sayyid Manjhan's *Madhumalati*, Malik Muhammad Jayasi's *Padmavat* and *Kanhavat*, and Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas*, across languages and scripts, in both scribal and oral form, and not always dependent on formal translation to circulate within a comparative framework. This approach reveals the texture of a literary culture expressed in plural forms, with varied histories of reception, changing patterns of patronage, and shifting linguistic preferences and literary tastes. Orsini identifies this intensive plurality and complex historicity as a dynamic model of significant geographies in world literature—even when the works did not circulate beyond the Purab region.

In chapter 3, Orsini critically extends the idea of literature to claim the robust body of Sant song-poems of Purab as part of world literature. By discussing Kabir's repertoire to reemphasize his poetry as theology, she simultaneously affirms both the fragmentary presence of theological ideas and the free adoption of aesthetic-poetic elements available in North Indian oral and written repertoires by Sants like Malukdas, Paltudas, Bhikha, and Gulal as parallel instances of "ventriloquism," internal dialogism of stories and historical trajectories. She positions this repertoire as "located" while exposing variations of location and orientation and "mobile" through intermedial changes: oral transfer to chapbook printing, radio, audio cassettes, and digital technologies (77).

The next chapter on literary education and the multilingual cultivation of Persian and Brajbhasha poetry by "local cosmopolitans" presents a more nuanced and situated conception of the literary elite, changing tastes, and a more diffused idea of patronage. *Tazkirahs* depicting Persian and Brajbhasha poets affirm multilingual education as the core of such literary practice and imaginaries. Orsini identifies literary centers in *q'asbahs* like Bilgram, rural Awadh, and urban Lucknow to trace local forms of cosmopolitanism across various trajectories of linguistic preferences, with new choices for Brajbhasha and Urdu reorienting existing equations of multilingualism in the urban Sufi and cosmopolitan courtly domains.

In chapter 5, she extends her discussion of the multiple logics of literary reception and rejection to the epistemological shifts colonial modernity brought through print culture, which reshaped multiscript, multilingual literary categories into linear and monolingual canons. She examines the reproduction or neglect of early modern forms and how new institutions forged literary canons, such as the revival of Awadhi/Hindavi *kathā*, which circulated less during the Mughal period, in the making of Hindi. By shifting between micro-textual readings and micro-spatial analyses to wide-angled surveys of institutions, Orsini engages with debates over scale in both micro and global contexts.

Orsini's emphasis on the poetic function of local genres in multiple registers for multiple audiences affirms their inherent ambivalence. She argues that such expansive and inclusive generic spaces expose the lacuna in world literature that create maps following Eurocentric generic ideas, such as laws of diffusion and convergence. Instead, she follows the alternative ideation of space in the circulation of literary tropes (like the *qaṣīdah*, the ghazal, the novel), intervening in discussions of scale and analytical units now prominent in historical studies. While examining literary agents and analyzing individual texts, she constantly shifts focus to provide the multi-scalar reading essential for constructing a multilingual history.

At this point, Orsini has to disentangle language from religious identity by distancing her argument from both interpretive models of literary contact—rivalry and syncretism—so prevalent in literary histories of South Asia. For Orsini, the prolonged “coexistence” of languages is more adequate than “contact” to define the absorption of linguistic elements across crisscrossing trajectories (18). Orsini strengthens her argument by defining interaction, exchange, seepage, and resonance within a Bakhtinian dialogic framework that remains her core theoretical apparatus.

While moving away from the prevalent ideas of contact/translation, impact, and reception in world literature, Orsini proposes alternative concepts of transmission. First, she emphasizes intertextuality and demonstrates how other authors/texts remain reaccentuated in a particular text even when not overtly acknowledged. Orsini's close reading of such traces supports her argument for literary circulation beyond the physical and deliberate forms of boundary crossing through formal translation and adaptation. Second, to explain forms of literary habitus, education, and language expertise, Orsini emphasizes the auditory/performative aspect of the literary, thus bringing orature to the stage of world literature. Simultaneously, she demonstrates how through the act of listening, multiple enunciations present in the same *q'asbah* or urban milieu enter individual literary expressions, reaccentuated by authors living in these environments and reaffirming multilingualism as the ethos of ordinary literary everyday life, such as the act of strolling as metaphorically expressed by poets like Azad Bilgrami (130–35). Thus, she maintains that Persian or Sanskrit loanwords can result from living in a multilingual milieu and may not require any corollary presence of grammar or prosody to validate their presence (194).

Temporal shifts remain a defining factor in Orsini's spatial approach, which she observes alongside political shifts, *q'asbah*-rural dynamics, and transformations in literary taste from genre to genre or author to author. In her proposed multilingual literary history, such dynamic transformations are conceptualized as continuities and realignments rather than replacements and substitutions (164), as prevalent in histories of monolingual literature. She illustrates a far more dynamic and complex dialogic process to show how

Awadhi *kathās*, so popular in the Sultanate period, were shadowed by the use of new lyrical forms of Krishna devotionism in Brajbhasha, while the emergence of Urdu redefined literary systems. Yet multilingual experiences continued, provoking us to view changes during the colonial period not as drastic epistemic and aesthetic transformations ushered in by English and print, but as an overlapping domain of different, continuing trajectories perceptible in newly emerging genres.

This book represents the culmination of Orsini's two decades of research on the literary expressions of the Awadh region as a multilingual locality, undertaken in an effort to disintegrate and demystify conceptions of the world that recognize their elements through a "complacent distant gaze" (7). It offers correctives for various exclusions that have remained naturalized in the normative technologies of recognition in writing monolingual literary history across ages. *East of Delhi* finally offers a critical perspective—a standpoint—for engaging with any multilingual locality as a significant geography in world literature.

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