

Masthead Logo

The Iowa Review

Volume 26
Issue 3 *Fall*

Article 14

1996

Sweeper Women

Beth Lee Simon

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Simon, Beth Lee. "Sweeper Women." *The Iowa Review* 26.3 (1996): 93-101. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.4475>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Beth Lee Simon

SWEEPER WOMEN

MY RESEARCH ASSISTANT, Om Ji Prakash, had taken me to the Nepali enclave, one of the most insular neighborhoods in the entire sacred city of Banaras. Om Ji's wife's sister-in-law had given us an introduction to a woman there, a cigarette seller who claimed she had come to India a hundred years ago. The woman spoke the local dialect of Bhojpuri, and hungered for company, and while the entire Nepali neighborhood knew every word of every story, the sister-in-law thought I was the one person who might still be interested. Wasn't I the Westerner with the research grant, the one who roamed town, asking locals to speak into my tape recorder? That's what Om Ji's wife said. Didn't I stay up all night, alone with my tapes? That's what my housekeeper had announced last week at the temple.

Om Ji and I found the cigarette seller squatting on a chipped concrete step in front of a little shrine dedicated to Ganesh, the elephant-faced god. Beside her, seven cigarettes were spread in a fan on a torn piece of burlap sacking. She wore a washed-out widow's sari, grey and tea-stained, wrapped like a shroud. Her face, scoured with minute cracks, was a flood plain after drought. Her eyes were buried beneath massive wrinkles. She had no teeth.

She was prattling to herself as we walked up. We folded our hands over our hearts in greeting, and Om Ji started to ask if I could record her. She simply raised her voice and continued. She talked and talked, and for the first half hour, I thought, *This is it. This could be the centerpiece of my work*, but then she began to drift in and out of dream or trance or unconsciousness.

She would go silent, quiver, as if tasting a delicious tidbit, then mutter an isolated phrase, "the Big Man," or "wandering away," or "in the season of jack fruit," but when I repeated it, "Yes, the season of jack fruit. Tell me about that," she would roll her eyes and rock. Sometimes she barked a word, distinct but unfamiliar. The first time, I asked, "What's that word?"

“Nepali?” she asked back.

“No,” I said, enunciating slowly, “not the language. I want to know the meaning,” but she ignored me.

The next time I asked, “What is that?” she snorted. “Bhojpuri. Sanskrit. Ingles. God knows.” She could have been speaking in tongues.

Her rhythm was monotonous. No consonant was fully formed. The only vowel was “ah.” She hummed movie theme songs, said she had been married three times, said she had never married. Once, she stiffened and I thought she was having a stroke, but when I reached for her, she shook me off and continued sculling in her sea of private talk.

I was frustrated, bored. I decided she was senile, that she wasn’t speaking any real language, and turned off the recorder. That was when she frightened me. She stopped rocking, looked straight at me, and her eyes were clear. “What exactly do you understand?” she said.

Om Ji and I went back to his house. We were tired, itchy at how the afternoon had gone. We sat in his living room, drinking tea, quiet, and I was trying not to think about anything at all, when he set down his cup and said, “That cigarette seller was a member of the Sweeper caste.”

“Yes. Sure.”

“And what about the Sweepers?”

The Sweeper caste is untouchable. By tradition, they are the sweepers of roads, the cleaners of latrines, the ones who haul away trash, who dispose of dead things. Sweepers stride along the street edges, through the gutters, clearing debris from drains and shop fronts. They glide through the railway station, the Bank of India, the anterooms to the courts of law, doubled over to brush the floor, again and again, with their short twig brooms.

“Okay,” I said, “What about them?”

Om Ji stood up and folded his arms over his chest. “You want examples of all kinds of Banarsi speech, nah? And you say it doesn’t matter what a person is in this life. This being so, you should tape the Sweepers. They too are Banarsis.”

I decided he was calling me a racist, and stood up to face him. “There is no doubt,” I said as if I were being patient, as if I were too dignified to acknowledge how he misjudged me, “that Sweepers are Banarsis.”

“Good. Excellent. In that case, I go to arrange the necessaries.” Om Ji sounded so pleased, I suspected he had won a bet with himself. “Tomorrow, you meet me at Durga Ji Temple and go to these people. And, before you leave your own abode, you must eat food and drink water.”

When I arrived the next morning, Om Ji was already negotiating with a bicycle rickshawallah. “Let’s go, let’s go,” he said, helping me into the rickshaw, then handing the rickshawallah a fist full of rupees. “This man waits for you,” he said. “When finished, he returns you to my house.” Then Om Ji walked off, and the rickshawallah started west on Sonarpur Road.

Sonarpur Road divides sacred Banaras from the rest of the mundane world. A mile out of town, it curves, and just at the curve, the ground on the south side slopes away to a field that fills ankle high with water during the monsoons. The earth there is clay, and after the water runs off, the mud bakes hard.

The rickshawallah stopped pedaling. He took a cigarette out of his pocket, and a transistor radio from under his seat. He flicked on the radio, lit the cigarette and put his feet up.

I had been driven past this spot before, but had never gotten down and stood, as I did now, on the shoulder of the hill, the margin of Banaras. Across the road was an ordinary cluster of stalls offering tea, fried sweets and expensive salty snacks. University students, healthy, clean, milled in front of the stalls, chatting and spending money. Most were male, dressed in the long, white overshirt and loose, white pajama pants of national politicians.

On my side, at the bottom of the slope, the Sweeper settlement spread out like an excavation site or a closed-down carnival. I hadn’t thought about where Sweepers lived, and now I was shocked by what I saw, by the extent of it, the uneven rows of stubby, mudded rectangles, most with badly thatched roofs that at first I took for makeshift sheds. Patchy chickens pecked at dust inside pens made of broken sticks and string. Outside one house, a billy goat with an erection, tethered to an overhead wire, strained at the pigs and scabby dogs who nosed a pile of refuse. An old man slept on a string cot near the goat. In a doorway across from the sleeper, three men played cards. One of the

men took a swig from a glass jar, handed the jar to the man beside him, and slapped down a card.

Scraps of paper and yarn blew through the air like small kites. A pack of naked children, three, four, six years old, chased each other, screeching and laughing, around and around a long single story gray building. Even from where I stood, I could see that they had open sores, swollen bellies, that their hair was rusty brown, uncombed, dried out. These were not the plump, black-haired children of my Indian friends, the ones with glossy skin, who grew up on milk sweets.

The rickshawallah glanced at me. "*Prob-lem?*"

I didn't know what to say, what to call this small jolt that seemed slightly like fear. I shook my head. "Nahī Brother. No problem."

At the bottom of the hill, a woman was waiting for me. I said, "Namaste," and she walked me over to three stools set in a nearby courtyard. She waved at one and said politely, "Bhait, nah?" *Sit, won't you?* and we sat.

I took my cassette recorder out of my *Free Tibet* shoulder bag and held it up. "I'd like to record our conversation," I said in Bhojpuri. "Okay?" I smiled at her, and she smiled at me, and then three more women appeared and squatted beside us, and there we were, smiling and smiling.

I looked around, and for a moment, I seemed to be adrift on the surface of an inland sea boxed in by hills on four sides. The students feeding themselves across the road, the rickshawallah with his radio, Om Ji, everyone familiar was impossibly far away.

The woman who acted as my host looked at me expectantly. The others leaned toward me. I was about to ask if they wanted to listen to the tape afterward when two more women came over, then another, and then I blanked. I couldn't remember the language, couldn't remember why I was there. I thought, *I can't do this. I don't want to know anything about this. I should get up. Leave. Walk back up the hill*, but I saw my hand push the record button, heard my voice say in Bhojpuri, "Okay. It's on. We're recording." The women waggled their heads from side to side—the Indian motion for "Yes." Two more hunkered down on the periphery, and I put the cassette player on the ground.

The saris of the older women were thin and faded to muddy colors. The younger women were loaded with adornments, plastic bangles, tin

toe rings, dull metal pieces hung from their ears. They wore long skirts like bells, and sari blouses made of rough bright cotton, red, azure, black, with scoop necklines and short sleeves so tight that the sleeve edge cut a line on their upper arms. The blouses closed down the front with hooks and eyes, and ended at the bottom of the rib cage. One woman nursed her baby by holding him under the blouse hem.

A young, beautiful woman walked into the circle and sat on the ground in front of me, her face, perfect, was a small moon rising just above my knees. Her *nak phul*, the nose flower, an emerald colored chip, caught sunlight and flashed from the curve of her nostril. She said, "Tho, kya cheez?" *So, what thing? Is there something?* and I thought, *Maybe there is*, and said, "Yes, thank you. I'd like to ask a few questions."

To start most taping sessions, I used what I thought was a neutral opening: "How did you come to live in Banaras?" but today, I told the truth. "The fact is, I had no idea you were here. This settlement. This."

The beautiful woman agreed. "No, you wouldn't know of us. We don't go out."

Then another, "That's right, we don't go out."

My host said that among Sweepers, both men and women go out to work, but not everyone and not everyday. Some never climb to the top of the hill, to the level of the road. They stay down here. They stay below.

The moon-like woman reached her hand just shy of my arm. "You understand? I'm telling you, we don't go outside."

The morning was sunny, cool, the air, fresh enough to almost cover the soft stink of rotting fruit. Three crows flying over, cried out, as if they knew my name. At the top of the embankment, twenty or thirty vultures perched in a leafless tree, like huge drops of black water.

At home that night, going over the tape, paying attention to exactly what was said, I found that the word used most often, the word used a thousand times, was *No*. And I realized then, that no one had fed me tea or food, or touched me, or taken me inside a dwelling.

On my tape, ten, twelve voices, voice swimming into voice, became a stream of talk about losing one's family on the day of the wedding, about the tyranny of mothers-in-law, about the rapaciousness and deli-

ciousness of men. One asked if I was married, if I had children, if I was barren. Someone close to the microphone whispered the herbs and positions for conceiving a child. Someone ancient recited a parable. Once, someone shouted. Most had been married into this settlement which meant that they, like other Banarsis, in one generation or another, were immigrants.

The women knew the important facts about the residents of Banaras, who was poor and generous, who, rich and stingy. They named names, of tourist touts, politicians, police. The voices coiled together like mineral-rich kelp, and at first, I didn't understand every word, but, playing the recording again and again, what at first had been mildly pleasant, became melodious, then familiar, then, at last, meaningful.

That morning, we addressed each other as kin, saying, "Sister" or "Sister-in-law," "Daughter-in-law," or "Aunt," and in this way, each of us was related, by blood or marriage or debt, and debt too, was kinship. No one used a given name. No one asked for mine.

For research purposes, I had written down the formal name of each woman and checked the pronunciation. When I left the settlement, I had a complete list, but by evening, at home, in the company of only their voices, I couldn't match my list with the speakers. Finally, I sorted them out by timbre and topic, but the only names I could give them were Woman #1, Woman #2, Woman #6, Woman #10.

In the weeks following the interview, I was told about Sweepers, about their government contracts, about the good wages that vitiate attempts to continue school or acquire a skilled trade. I learned that when higher caste families wanted their private latrines cleaned, they hired only Sweeper women in order to avoid the possibility that a female of their own household might meet and run off with a Sweeper man. I learned how Sweepers incur a lifetime of debt for their splendid, movie-like, weddings. I learned how the daily liquor consumption used up the weekly income.

On that morning, however, the women told me about their new building, a single story, flat roof structure. The facade was bumpy, cinder concrete, with two glass windows set into each side.

"See this?" My host ran her hand over a door. It hung evenly and fit the frame. "Doors," she said. "Front and back." She showed me how

they shut securely, with a satisfying click. She ordered me to open and close each.

“Nice and snug,” I said. “Good carpentry.”

In the settlement, the building was unique. “It is not mud,” my host said. “It is not temporary.”

“It is not easily demolished,” said another.

“All four walls are firm.” A third. “Pakka.” *Finished.*

“Aek dam pakka,” said another. *Completely solid.*

I patted an exterior wall.

“Done by charity,” my host told me flatly. “Someone gave the money for this building.”

I was impressed with such quiet benevolence. “Who?”

A tiny, dark girl, arms like sticks, whispered, “Baba Daniel.” She described him as bald, with a beard, a man who wore a black shirt, leather sandals, a cross. I suspected, in spite of the Hindu term “Baba,” *holy man*, this person was a Christian and a Westerner. I asked if Baba Daniel was a missionary, and the girl said, “He talks to Jesus.”

“He’s Catholic,” said my host. “And that’s fine. Religion can be a good thing.”

She said that Baba Daniel had brought three knitting machines. They were lined up on a table, inside the new building, and when Baba returned, today or next week, he would demonstrate how to use them. He wanted the women to form a knitting co-op and produce sweaters. They could make money and be home, not out, sweeping the Banaras streets where terrible things happened to their children as they trailed in the dusty wake of their mothers’ brooms. Sweeper children died from taxi smashes, rusted nails, rabid dogs. “Make sweaters at home,” Baba Daniel had said. Acrylic yarn was cheap. He would find a patron to provide yarn. The foreman of the indentured road crew camped on the Ganges had agreed to buy what they knitted.

The tiny girl said to me, “This sweater thing is good, isn’t it? Because, we don’t have a single paisa, and my parents will need to give something with me.” She held her arm parallel to mine to show how dark her skin was. She was at least thirteen or fourteen, but undersized. Her parents would need a good dowry to marry her off.

In Banaras, I thought I had learned to do without, to live, by choice, with very little, with bare walls, small meals, silence in the evening,

one cup of tea. I sought simplicity, hidden as bone, luminous and hard, but now, with the Sweepers, their piles of scraps and tin, the coughing babies, loose pigs, dowry and Baba Daniel and the sweaters, the raveling, loud, public shiftiness of it all, I was ashamed. This was not what I had meant by poverty.

“Give to those who have nothing,” my host said. “That is the virtuous thing to do. In this life, the act of giving is a duty.”

I asked who embraced duty, who saw that everyone had enough. Christians? Volunteer agencies? Who were the shepherds of the disenfranchised, the ostracized castes, the poor? Who responded to need?

“Brahmins,” said my host. “And landowners.”

I was surprised. I had assumed these groups kept what they had for themselves. “Why? Because of caste?”

“Because,” said my host, “they know what is just, and they know what is unjust.”

“Maybe this Westerner thinks such knowledge is a big secret.” A toothless woman, dewlaps like a dry cow, cackled. “You think only the poor recognize justice? You think we are the only ones who know what is fair?” and at that, we all laughed.

“In brief,” said my host, “the meaning of charity is money.”

Was she asking for some? They needed so much. “Isn’t the government your best source for large amounts?” I asked.

Hoots, and one woman called out something so filthy that her sister-in-law, sitting next to her, smacked her.

The old woman’s daughter-in-law crept over, lit a *beedi*, a leaf cigarette, and held it to the old woman’s lips. The old woman inhaled deeply, coughed out pearls of smoke. “Last summer, the rains killed us.”

“Government! Big talkers,” the daughter-in-law said. “Three things they do, nah? Talk, shit, sleep.”

“Sometimes they get which is which mixed up.” The old woman shook her finger at me. “They promised us. They said, ‘We will give. We will give. We will give.’”

The nursing mother, sitting crosslegged on the ground, held her infant to her breast like a ball. She said, “Houses collapsed. From the rains. Then? Government inspectors come. Big inspection. Walk up

and down, up and down. Big parade. Took maybe ten minutes. Then? Government makes big announcement. Two hundred rupees. Understand?"

Two hundred rupees was about eighteen dollars in U.S. currency.

My host spat. "She means that each of us was supposed to get two hundred." She swept her arm in a circle. "Show me anyone here who possesses two hundred rupees."

I had at least two hundred, in five and ten and twenty rupee notes, loose in my bag. Two hundred rupees was my morning cash. I might not spend it before lunch, but then, I might. I needed cream. And this morning, Munni had insisted I buy a bangle, a bracelet, something for each wrist, because in India, a woman with bare arms was inauspicious. And one day this week, I would order a set of brass weights from the brass dealer in the bazaar, not because I am a vendor who makes her living by weighing out herbs or rice or tea, but because the weights themselves are wonderful to hold, because I like brass. Who was there to ask me what I would do with two hundred rupees? Who would ever demand that I give an account?

I said, "I must leave. Thank you for letting me come here. Perhaps we could meet again?" I reached into my bag and scabbled together the rupee notes.

My host had gone into a huddle with four others. They giggled and hissed "Yes!" "No!" "You do it!" They sounded like furious bees or electrons, pushing and pulling on each other, until suddenly they spun around in one move. My host's hands were spread like a tray, and the tiny dark girl placed two pairs of toe rings in the middle of her palms. The first pair was set with clear glass, the other pair, with red, two brilliant crystals of blood.

I scooped up the paper money and stretched my hands toward her, and she stretched hers toward me. Such enormous wealth between us. The untold riches of the world.