

Houston Asian American Archive Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Bapsi Sidhwa

Interviewers: Melissa Verne (Junior); Arthur Cao (Sophomore)

Date/ Time of Interview: June 28, 2013, at 3:00PM

Transcribed by: Melissa Verne; Arthur Cao

Edited by: Priscilla Li (5/1/2017)

Audio Track Time: 2:04:17

Background:

Bapsi Sidhwa is an internationally acclaimed author residing in Houston, Texas. She was born in Lahore, Pakistan, in the pre-partition area, and has many vivid memories of the troubled period before, during, and after the partition—memories that often served as inspiration for her novels. She married once in Bombay, India, after attending Kinnaird College, and had two children in her first marriage. She was divorced and later married her current husband, with whom she now lives in Houston. The couple moved to the United States and moved to a few places, including Charleston and Atlanta, before eventually settling in Houston. Mrs. Sidhwa began her writing career in Pakistan, and continues to write even in retirement (she taught at several universities in the United States). She is known for collaborating with Indian director Deepa Mehta, who directed a film adaptation of Mrs. Sidhwa's novel, *Cracking India*. Mrs. Sidhwa is a practicing Zoroastrian, and does quite a bit of volunteer work in various Houston organizations.

Setting:

The interview focuses on the subjects of labor and capital, primarily through Mrs.

Sidhwa's experiences as a word-famous writer. The interview also focused on Mrs. Sidhwa's childhood, marriage, and family, as an attempt to put her experiences into greater perspective.

The interview took place in the home of Bapsi Sidhwa, over the course of two hours and four minutes, with minor interruptions.

Interviewers:

At the time of this interview, Melissa Verne is a rising junior at Rice University, majoring in Asian Studies and Political Science. She is originally from Raleigh, North Carolina, is of European descent, and spent a year living in Taipei, Taiwan.

Arthur Cao is an undergraduate student at Rice University majoring in Civil and Environmental Engineering. He is from Fuzhou, China.

Interview Transcript:

Key:

MV	Melissa Verne
AC	Arthur Cao
BS	Bapsi Sidhwa
-	Speech cuts off; abrupt stop

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

...	Speech trails off; pause
Italics	Emphasis
(?)	Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets	Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

MV: This is Melissa Verne.

AC: And this is Arthur Cao.

MV: We're here today on June 28, 2013 in the home of Bapsi Sidhwa to interview Bapsi Sidhwa for the Houston Asian American Archive oral history interview project. Um, if you could just begin by telling us briefly about yourself and your life?

BS: You'll have to ask me something more specific.

MV: More specific.

BS: My life would be really rambling on for years.

MV: Okay. Um, I guess talk first about what Pakistan was like at the time of your birth and what you remember from your childhood.

BS: Okay, well I have very, uh, vague memories of my childhood, you know? Uh, I had polio as a child, with the result, uh, that I was, uh at the age of, uh four or five I went through some severe surgeries. But that corrected my leg and I was fine, and then I could play around with children. Otherwise I was sort of alone.

And uh, I remember, you know, my neighborhood was uh—there used to be a sick doctor—we used to live on Warse (?) Road. And on one side of me was a sick doctor, and a Hindu family, and, and the—not sick doctor, just a sick gentleman with a buffalo, and a American wife. And they had Rosie and Peter, two children who were my friends. And on the other side of me was what was known as the Birdwood Barracks, where the British, uh, colonel and major and people like that lived, with the whole platoon of uh, conscripts. You know? Indian and Pakistani conscripts. Of course at that time is was uh India. And uh, I sort of remember it was a sort of happy time, because I used to play in the garden and there would be all the children, you know, we had a big lawn and we'd be—all be running around and playing together. And then suddenly, I don't remember when it happened, but suddenly, uh my neighbors disappeared, you know? Uh, the Sikhs obviously went across the border, because you know by this time, the riots must have ch—started.

And I have a very vivid memory of the chanting of mobs coming from far away. The Hindus would be saying [speaking foreign language], the Sikhs would be saying [speaking foreign language], and the Muslims [speaking foreign language]. I couldn't hear the words distinctly, it was like a *roar* coming from far away, you know? 'Ohh-ohh,' like that. And even as a child, I knew that this is a very threatening sound, and these mobs are not up to any good.

And, you know, this must have gone on for some time, because I remember myself as much younger, and then a little more awareness must have dawned, you know? Because then I remember going to the house of another Parsee family in the Mozang area, which was, you know where we lived was a more uh elite area. It was on the outskirts, and where this Parsee family lived was in the inside area, and we went there to play, and suddenly the whole strip of—sort of, shops and houses and whatever was set on fire. And we saw the fires blazing up, you know? And

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

usually—when children see fire, they're excited, 'Ahh! Fire, fire!' But we didn't feel that way. We realized that this was something terrible happening. And after that—a little shortly after that, that whole family moved to our house.

And the—you know, these are sort of fragmented memor-memories, you know? Because childhood is not uh a time when you can record—at least my childhood was not a very aware childhood. I could not think of what was happening sequentially. When I was writing I could do everything, but the memories weren't sequential.

And then suddenly what I realized was that the house next door, which the Hindus used to live in, uh the window panes were all boarded up with cardboard, you know? A refugee family had moved in, you know? And they were frightened. Obviously. Now, you know, on hindsight these things I can tell—they were frightened so they wanted to conceal their presence. You know, so that somebody else would not come in and throw them away or take them out.

And all of Lahore was strewn with, you know, our uh sidewalks—people were sitting there trying to cook in tin cans, you know they were just refugees. Bedraggled, without any belongings, they were from the Indian side, you know—Lahore suddenly—there was a partition; and Amritsar's only sixteen miles from Lahore. So India was sixteen miles from Lahore, which is nothing, you see? So all these refugees suddenly flooded in, and it was chaotic in a way, because you know there were very poor people spread all over, and they were making use of—you know, some people would give them cans, you know? And they would start cooking in the cans—I don't know how they would do it, but they would be doing something there, because they had no belongings, you know? And it took them I suppose a long time to uh disperse to villages and to various places. Then uh because of polio again, my—you could say it's my misfortune, or good fortune—but the doctors advised my parents, 'Don't send her to school, after all she's not going to become a doctor or a professor,' which ironically I did become a professor, you know. 'And uh she's going to marry, have children—polio is bad for the nerves, don't strain her. She doesn't have to learn maths, and geometry, and things like that.' So uh this was unfortunate because that meant I got isolated, and uh I used to just walk along my road a short distance to go over to an Anglican (?) lady's house to study. And she used to teach me, you know, just little geography, little history. I never had to study these horrible things like maths and geography—geometry, or whatever, you know, all those things. I had no aptitude for it, too.

And uh one day when I was going like that—and then now obviously, this was—it must be a little after partition. But the trouble had subsided, the fires had finished, and I was walking with, you know, holding the finger of my gardener and walking, and there was a gunnysack lying on the road. And the gardener pushed it like that, and a young man spilled out, you know, a very handsome young man. He—pink cheeks, you know, he didn't – he looked sort of not dead, he looked you know, fresh. And uh he had a big gash here [points at abdomen], you know, as though somebody had trimmed his waist. There was no blood. And half of him, you know—there was the—you know what a gunnysack is, it's a sack, and they come in standard sizes, they were about [gestures size] that big. So, you know, he—partly he was here, and all I could see was his navel, his stomach, and he was lying like that. And uh—this thing, I just got so—you know, it – it registered, that here is a young life *wasted*, why? You know, even then it registered to a child. I must be about seven, eight at that time, you know.

Now I don't know if you know, but they made a movie of my book, *Earth*. So they tried to film this scene, and Rahul Khanna—have you seen the film? No. Okay, Rahul Khanna who acts the uh— we'd given him the role of Masseur, because that's how I'd woven him into the story—they tried to fit him into a gunny sack, to show him, you know, dead and come up like that. And they tried for two days and they couldn't fit him in. And Deepa asked me that, you know, 'What is happening? You sure it was a standard gunny sack?' I said, 'Yeah, you know, standard.' And after two days they got hold of a very big gunnysack and pushed him in, and he you know dead toppled out okay. But that's when, you know as an adult it occurred to me as a child I had not realized, his legs must have been dismembered. So that is why I saw just a little bit of him in the gunnysack, and then I saw his navel and his torso. And his—he was wearing that lungee you know, that uh cloth around his waist.

So these were the memories, and um, and, you see, that made my life very isolated, so I was not able to record too much. I mean, I could just go over to a couple of aunts and visit them, and you know, things like that. And uh, then this uh Anglican lady gave me uh a book called *Little Women*—you all know that, you know—and that was my first

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

encounter with uh fiction. And uh, I was—by this time, I was about eleven. The partition was over, all done with. And I read this book, and, you know, it just pulled me into the world of people. Otherwise, you know? Isolated child—I'd, I'd no way of ascribing role models, or anything, but when I read this book, I felt, 'Oh, I have friends, I have companions, I've role models, I have a family.' My parents were very uh removed from each other, you know, they hardly spoke to us, you know, we were just constantly with servants.

So, you know, uh after that I read constantly, you know—uh, fourteen hours a day, fifteen hours a day. And uh at the age of thirteen I gave my metric privately, and uh then they take you into college at fifteen, so I had to wait a year, and then I went to Kinnaird College, which was a stopgap measure. Girls went there before they got married. So I went there for a little while, and then I got married in Bombay. And, now that was a shock for a little girl from Lahore, which is like, you know, being, uh, brought up in one of these isolated villages in America, and then suddenly being thrust into New York. And how *shocked* the child would be, you know, like that. I was nineteen, I was married, and I just didn't know how to relate, you know, uh because my husband and his family and all were, you know, uh city people—love to go to parties and dance, and I'd never danced in my life, you know, I'd been to da—. So that was a shocking phase, but at the same time, it was the first time—now I'm a Zoroastrian, a Parsee. Now, in Lahore, where I grew up, there were no Zoroastrians. There were Christians and there were Muslims, you know. And uh Bombay is the place where the majority of our community live. So suddenly I was thrust into my own community, and I thoroughly enjoyed that, because they are a fun-loving, laughing community.

If you ever get a chance, read *The Crow Eaters*, it's about—it just means people who talk too much. So my community, the Parsees in Bombay, are forever squabbling and talking at the top of their voices, so they're known as [word in Urdu], which means people who are swallowed a crow and go 'Caa-caa-caa,' you know like that. Now this is a Indian proverb in all languages— in Hindi, in Gujarati, in Sindhi—you know, uh, I don't know if you'd follow, if what I say in Gujarati, they'll say, [speaking Gujarati], 'How much you talking!' [Speaking more Gujarati] 'Have you swallowed a—' [Gujarati word] is crow—'Have you swallowed a crow?' You know?

In Urdu it would be—in Punjabi, [speaking Urdu/Punjabi]. You know that's another—India has what, about 300 dialects, you know. So it's in every Indian dialect, when people talk too much, it's said you've swallowed a crow. And this is a very funny book about my community.

And then uh I started writing. Yeah, after I got married and I was there for a short while, I produced two babies. And, I'm trying to think of Lahore when I was about—you see again, when I was twelve, thirteen, other little Parsee girls who would be mixing together, you know, meeting boys or something, but I was just totally, you know, kept in the home. But I do remember there were places like uh, Stiffles (?) and Larangs (?), and Flashwen (?), Needles Hotel (?), where, where the grown-ups would go and dance. And you know, it was known as the palace of the East, Lahore, at that time. And uh, I—my pare—my mother would take us to eat sandwiches sometimes at these restaurants, you know, and at the—on our birthdays she'd take us to a restaurant called Shezan. But this was fairly after partition when I was thirteen, fourteen or so, yeah. Now—anything else you want to know of that era, or—?

MV: Um, did your—you mentioned that there were a lot of refugees—

BS: Yeah.

MV: —during and during and, sort of, after the partition.

BS: Yeah.

MV: Did your family help out the refugees at all?

BS: Yes, a lot. Uh, you see, my mother and my father's sister—we had a—they had a little [car] my father had, and they would get into that, and they would put uh cans of petrol at the back, and there was a little enclave quite further away—[speaking to Arthur] would you like to lean back or take a chair to lean back?

AC: Oh, no, I'm good.

BS: You're okay?

AC: Yeah.

BS: [Resumes narrative] And they would drive there with the—with the gas, you know? So that the Hindu refugees who came to that Hindu enclave, they would have petrol to get away, you know? They would be, obviously, better families, you know, who could afford to get cars, or who were being rescued by the Indian high commission, or people like that. It was a bad time for everybody and they were taken across the border. But the main things that happened in those times were huge caravans of refugees coming across the border—walking, you know? And those were filling up Lahore, you know? Like almost the footpaths and everything, they were filling up.

And then trains would come. And that was very sad, because now—a gentleman who was sixteen at that time, narrated this to me that, you know, he went because his uh sisters were coming on the train, and he went to receive the train—three days he went, three days, three nights he went, and one day, he said, the train came in like a ghost—you know? There was no lights, the—you know, in those days there were steam engines—the steam was hardly working. It just *crawled* in, the train. And they all rushed, people—a lot of people were sitting there. And they just rushed in, and they just found slaughtered bodies. You know?

The Sikhs had got hold of—the, you see, now they came from an area which was uh, [pause] I don't want to get too much into the history of it, but they came from Pathankot—where it was a Sikh enclave, and that train had been loaded there, and the Sikhs—you see, people were loading on top of the train, and the bottom of the train. They were filling up, you know—just, tight like sardines in the trains. Those who were sitting on top of the trains—they had tied, uh, wires across, you know? Certain lampposts. So that as soon as the train went past that, the people on top of the trains would fall down, and then they would be killed.

And the Sikhs, you know, their, uh, religious, uh, garment is also a sword. You know, every Sikh has to have a little dagger here, and they, so—be very proud of long swords. And they would kill people with their swords. That was the holy way of killing them, you know? Slaughtering you, like that, they would do—their swords, and they would kill people.

And uh, then, you know, after these trains came in, then, my God, Lahore came in to a vengeful turmoil, you know? And then the war—in every city in India and Pakistan, major cities, especially cities where the Mughals built—uh, Akbar's first capital was Lahore, Babur came to Lahore, you know, all these Mughal emperors. And, uh, they would have—they would have built walled cities inside the greater Lahore. Greater Lahore developed afterwards, but these were walled cities. And the Hindus and the—you know, lots of poor people would live—there would be a Hindu enclave, a Sikh enclave, a Muslim enclave in the walled cities.

And then the vendetta started. And then they started burning the Hindu enclaves and the—the Sikhs somehow um had already disappeared in a way, but the Hindus were there, and they were slaughtered. Of course a lot of Sikhs were also killed, you know. It—then it became a free-for-all on all sides, vengeful killing. And the worst was, it was not just vendettas, it was greed. I—this is my impression, as a child, and as an adult, that when there—when, uh, anarchy prevails, there's no governance, everything breaks down, greed comes in. And people were killing probably old—you know, let's say Muslim was killing Muslim at that time. First they were killing—the Hindus would take away their shops, their businesses, their things. And this man I saw dead when I was walking as eleven year old, you know, when I was little more adult, he was a Muslim. I—no, I was younger at that time. He was a Muslim. So he had been killed by other Muslims. Somebody had either wanted to take up his shop, or finish off an old vendetta, you know, revenge, or take away his wife—you know, something, something like that.

Houston Asian American Archive

Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

And at that time, everywhere in India and what became Pakistan, there was looting, killing, people grabbing other people's possessions, so what impressed me most at that time was greed. That, you know, without law and order, without governance, without police—the British could have *helped* stop that. But they didn't bother. They—you know, they wanted to say, 'See? We told you that the natives would fall on each other's throats. They don't know how to govern themselves.' And they encouraged that, you know? They played a very ugly role, you know, they caused fights in a way. I don't want to go into history, but you know there was the Indian Mutiny, when Indian Hindus and Muslims joined to throw out the British. And they killed a lot of British women and children.

And at that time, the British started the divide and rule policy. In a mandir, you know? A Hindu temple, they would throw in a carcass of a cow, and cow is very holy to the Hindus, and say, 'Ah, the Muslims had done that.' Or they would have paid the Muslims to do that. And in, uh, mosques they would tell the, uh, the Hindus to throw uh pig—you know, pig is a very dirty symbol for Muslims, you know. Horrible thing to have in a mosque. So that's how the enmity started to percolate.

Although I do remember Lahore, where Hindus and Muslims and everybody were living together. And uh, again this man who was sixteen at that time, had had more memories, he used to tell me that—and he was a Kashmiri Muslim, which meant he was fair, and he said, 'I would go to the shop of, uh, somebody who sell – sells the Indian sweets, and the Indian gentleman would—the Hindu gentlemen who was sitting there would say, 'Shoo, get away from our women. Don't pollute them.' So you see the Muslims were considered Untouchables, like, you know? So they should not touch the Hindu women. Hinduism was very caste—it's still very caste divided. The upper caste, the [unintelligible] caste, the Untouchable caste, and the Muslims were even lower than the Untouchable caste, you know? So it was something like that.

But they had lived and they had, uh, sort of accommodated each other's beliefs, you know? Uh, a lot of Muslim boys would go to Hindu houses to eat, and they would be served dinner in a broken plate, you know, cracked plate, and the glass would be dirty glass. And then this, uh— many people told me these stories. And then we would go—they would come to our house and our mothers would be there and feed them, you know? They didn't have the stigma. Muslims didn't have the caste system. And then they would say—okay—and then this Muslim boy asked them, 'Why is it that when you come to our house our mothers come forward and give you a feast, and we go to your houses, your women don't come out, and you know, uh, you're, uh— we're served on broken plates, and you know?' Then the Hindu boys would say, 'You don't know what happens afterwards. I'm told to wash your dirty plates and your glasses. They won't even touch them, you know? So I'm landed up washing them.'

And you know, they accommodated—they understood. Okay, this will happen, you know? And uh, it—you see, you grow up with these feelings, and you don't hurt each other's feelings. I know as a child I was told, never blame—never criticize anybody's religion. You know? It was rammed into us, because we lived in such a mixed, uh, religious society, you know? Uh, the Sikh's children were—Rosie, Peter were my friends.

Now when—at a, at a certain stage I remember the family—the Sikh family came to our house, and uh they brought their belongings, and you know, we had a lot of—they had—we all had servant's quarters at the back. And they put their belongings into our servant's quarters, you know. Telling my parents, 'You know, once this is over, we'll come back.' Everybody thought this would be over in a year or so, and things would sort out, and everybody'll come back, because this is what Nehru—not Nehru so much, but Jinnah said, you know? Hindu will cease to be Hindu, Muslims will cease to be Muslims, you know, it'll be all—everybody'll come and live where they belong.

But they never did come back, you know, and afterwards, *years* later, when I was about fifty, you know, suddenly a Hindu family came to my house, and by this time we'd moved house several times. I had divorced my husband and come—came to Lahore again and remarried my hus—I married my husband, you know? And this family suddenly turned up and said, 'My parents had mentioned that they left their belongings with your parents. And where are our stuff—is our stuff?' [Laughs] I said, 'I don't know. You can search my house.' They said, 'Oh they had left miniature paintings and lovely things.' I said, 'It's nowhere with us. I don't remember seeing anything, but you're welcome to go through our house, you know?' And of course God knows where those things were. It was a time of

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

chaos. Who knows where what went.

But the worst, worst thing that happened was that it was a free-for-all kidnapping women. You heard of this? Yeah. You know the Hindus, uh, kidnapped Muslim women, the Sikhs—the Sikhs were, somehow they became the most violent. They—you know, everybody kidnapped women, and it was like, uh, women were used as vessels of vendetta. They enacted revenge. They dishonored the women. By dishonoring the women they were dishonoring the man—the men the women belonged to, the religion of the—of the enemy party. So you know, women were—their bodies were the sites of everything they could do to dishonor the man's religion, his honor, his everything. And the women's bodies were used like this.

The Sikhs were from what I hear, and I read—you see, when I was writing *Cracking India*, I read books by old British authors and things, you know, and there was one author I read called Pendleton Moon (?), and he was in charge of a Sikh regiment. And he said that, 'I have to admit that the Sikhs were the most violent, because whereas the Hindus and Muslims would rape them and, you know, things like that, the Sikhs would cut their bellies open, and you know, pregnant women and throw their children away, and spear the children and roam around with them on the swords.'

And I've heard countless stories of these incidents as I was growing up, you know? And then there were always hush-hush conversations, you know? Whispered conversations between my aunts, and mother, and other adult women. And I used to wonder, I could just hear—you know, the mother, the sister-in-law. And—as I, when I grew up I realized they were talking about, uh, women that had been carried away from somebody's house. You know, so-and-so's mother was lifted, so-and-so's sister was lifted, so-and-so—they used to use the term 'lifted,' carried away by the mobs.

So that was a very—then, right next to our house, you know—all our, we were on Waris Road, there were a whole bunch of bungalows, and everybody's roof joined—the servant's quarters roofs. The bungalows were separate. The servant's quarters, ours joined the Hindu man's house, then there beyond that was a Christian man—person's house, joined those servant's quarters. And as children, uh, we used to go—my brother and I—we used to climb the servant's quarters, and we discovered in the Hindu person's servant's quarters, there was a big gate. A steel gate, which was shut. And a big, burly Sikh, you know, was standing there. There was a padlock there, and he would be standing there with his sword, you know.

And as children, we didn't realize what this was, and we thought this was a women's jail. And we used to literally—you know, children are very heartless, we used to say, 'Hey, jailbirds! Jailbirds!' And, you know, taunt them. And they were—they would look at us, you know, bewildered. But then we realized they were what they called 'recovered women'—uh, teams of—now I was, you know, on the Pakistani side of the border, so teams of Hindu women would come, going from village to village, from house to house, and surprisingly people would say, you know, in villages especially, 'A woman is in *that* house. We don't think she belongs there.' You know? And then they would go in and find—little villages are close-knit, and they know each other, they're usually related, and they would find Hindu women there. And these were the women—this was called—they would recover these women.

[Doorbell rings; recording is paused as Mr. Sidhwa answers the door. Mrs. Sidhwa starts speaking slightly before recording is started again]

BS: —because by now, the women had—whoever's house they were in, they had married them. The ones they were recovering. And they had produced children. And when the women took them away, they said, 'No, no, no, you can't take the children. These are Muslim children! You have to come away alone.' And they would drag the women away. So, they were kidnapped, and put into, you know, into different environments. They were raped, obviously, and then somebody'd marry them, produce children, and they'd, you know—sort of, form families. And then they were taken away and put into these little camps like the one next to our house. Without their children. You know? That, uh—how can you have uh the children [unintelligible word] by a Muslim?

And the same thing happened on that side, you know? Uh, I, I don't know—I mean, I'm sure the same thing happened on that—the Indian side, you know? Uh, the Muslim women—now these were, you know, uh social workers. After the partition. They were allowed to go back and forth, and they went to the Hindu villages, or the Sikh villages, and I don't know if they recovered women and brought them. And, uh, I don't know much about that, but I saw these women as a child. So I know these were recovered and brought here.

Then—you know, uh a woman who is raped, who has produced other people's children, is never accepted back by the family. Especially in a Hindu household. Because if it is known that a girl from that family has been raped, and is living there, then nobody will marry the other children. That household has been disgraced. You know? That, that family will be disgraced. So nobody would accept these women back, you know? And they were—they became, sometimes, prostitutes, they became uh—they were given sewing machines to, you know, sew clothes for other people. God knows what happened to them. Their – their lives were miserable.

So this is what I'm recalling, you know? As a child, what I saw, things.

MV: So you didn't, as a child, feel sheltered at all from what was going on?

BS: Well, yes, you know, because—okay, not a very—uh, of course I felt sheltered, because I had my parents with me. I was exposed to seeing fires, seeing dead bodies, especially this man falling out of this thing. And then one day—now this was when we were—I think, we were about six or seven, my brother and me, and the partition was done, and uh, our maiden name was Bhandara. Now that is a very Hindu-sounding name. And we had long driveways on either side—you know, little garden and a driveway.

And one day, uh, about six carts with men standing in them drove into our house. And the carts *galloped* in, you know? The—you know, the wooden carts, with rickety horses, but, you know, they—with macho feelings, they galloped into our compound, and the men were roaring, you know [speaking foreign language]. And I remember it vividly, because, you know, my mother stood out, and she had her hand on my brother and my head, you know? [Mrs. Sidhwa starts to choke up; crying] That was very frightening. That still brings back—anyway, because we knew that this was not very nice. [Pause]

[Still choked up a bit] I'm just being dramatic, you know? [Speaking normally now] As children, what does one know? So, our mother was standing like this, and these men said—they were walking in, you know? And our cook was a Muslim. Our kitchen was here, our portico was here, where the men with the carts came in. Our veranda was here, where the mother was standing with her hands on us, and the cook came out of the kitchen, you know? Big, fat fellow. And he said, 'What do you bastards think you're doing?' You know? And, uh, these people said, [starting to choke up again] 'This is a Hindu house, and we've come to loot it.' Look at me— why am I acting like this? I'm sorry. And, uh, they said, 'But you bastards, don't you know? Bhandara is also Parsee name. They're not Hindus!' You know?

And, then, the other—there was another Shira, another Muslim servant, he was a Pathan from the frontier, you know? I mean they look different. And—then, you know, I uh I was told that this fellow's beating eggs when he came out. I don't have that memory; I have the memory of just standing there. But the cook apparently came out beating eggs. Now these things were also embroidered by the adults, you know? And uh, then they, you know, sort of brought out – it was hot— brought out, uh, a lot of iced water, and gave them water to drink, and you know? Now they were Muslims among the Muslims. So you know then there was peace established, and our household was saved, you know, like that.

But, uh, that is why the other Parsee families had, uh, come away to our house, and they were living at the back of our house. And then they went away because their houses, where they were living, had been burned. Those Parsee friends of mine, young people, with their children, they went away to India. Then they went across to India. Very

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

few Parsee families remained. As it is, in the whole world there are only 120,000 Parsees, you know? So wherever we are, it's a small community. Yeah.

Any more questions? I mean I'm remembering things and telling you as they come.

AC: Tell us a little more about your parents.

BS: Uh, parents. Okay—yeah, that's interesting. Because, you see, our—my parents had a whole mixture of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh friends. And uh, I remember one day, and this was very—I think partition had already taken place, you know? And one day I heard a fight going on in our sitting room. And I realized that there was a Hindu gentleman there, and he had not left yet. And these were all educated people, friends of my parents. A Muslim gentleman, and my parents there, and they were bullying this Hindu gentleman, you know? 'What are you doing,' or whatever it was, and my parents were intervening, you know? And—you know, the feelings were so bad then, because everybody had lost family members, and they had all seen this chaos. And you know, really, there are certain things you cannot see without going a little mad. You know all this butchering, and all—you know, I never understood something, which they describe as bloodlust. You know, there's something—I, as a author, can go into the bodies of men—evil men, good men, all sorts of peoples, but bloodlust is not what I can understand, you know? Because blood is something frightening still to most women—and to most men, I'm sure. But then when there's a lot of blood flowing, men get into a cycle—as happened, you know, in Rwanda, and places—where the more blood they spill, the *more* they want to spill, you know? It—it is a very strange phenomenon. So, when that sort of thing happens, people go a little mad. And they start becoming vengeful, and cruel, and you know, all sorts of things.

Now here was a group of people who were educated lawyers—they were all lawyers, because at the time of par—you see my father was a orphan, in the sense that his father died young. When my father was about eleven or twelve. And we used to have a wine shop. It—uh, a little uh... a little bigger, say the area of the living room, this room, sort of wine shop—and on top of it was where my grandparents lived, above the wine shop. As children we used to be taken there frequently to visit our grandparents.

And at the time of partition, when a lot—now my father grew up, you know, reading, uh, studies under street lamps, and things like that. They were in extreme sort of poverty. My aunts, very stern women, with their heads covered, and you know, saris wrapped around, became the barmaids. And, you know, that was just selling, and of course in those days apparently, they used to pour out beer and, you know, people would come in demanding beer, and they would give them beer, but these stern—I can't imagine, these stern barmaids there. And this was their business. And this became my father's business.

Now, when partition took place, and the Hindus ran away, there was a place called the Murree Brewery, a British institution. Uh, very close to Lahore, there's Rawalpindi, Islamabad, and beyond there, at the foothills of the Himalayas, and Murree is on the foothills, and they'd made their brewery out there. But, you know, in those days they used to have horse carts bring the barrels of beer down, apparently, and you know. It became a chore for the horses to climb up on the hills and bring the beer down, so they brought the Murree Brewery into what is now a satellite town of Islamabad, the flat town. Now, there were a lot of Hindu shareholders, too— British and Hindu. My father had a business gene in his head, you know? And uh, he just bought over at the—at a very low price, the shares from the Hindus—the Murree Brewery shares. Now, he must have done that, because at that time, he started acquiring lawyer friends.

Our parents started acquiring a lot of lawyer friends, because since he had acquired the shares, he got the brewery—got control of the brewery. Now the brewery was a very lucrative sort of thing—everybody wanted it. And the other rich, rich uh, Muslims wanted to take it over, you know? And there were court case after court case—that is how I'm – I'm now remembering why my father had a whole bunch of lawyer friends, and whole bunch of—and there was this Hindu lawyer, Muslim lawyers. They were *all* having dinner, and then they were in the sitting room, and I heard this fight break out. So the Hindus—you know, the well-off Hindus, and people like that, were probably

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

told, 'You are safe, we are there, we'll protect you, we won't touch you.' But I now realize, you know, that they had attacked this man—you know, just fisticuffs, they were not killers—they were educated lawyers. But they were showing bit of macho-ism, you know, revenge and that sort of thing.

So apparently there was still quite a lot of Muslims there, still. And slowly, slowly they all disappeared. But from that side, uh, I try to think of that place...where the Sikhs were. And there were lot of Muslims there. Not one stayed behind, they were *all* shunted off on the trains—butcher, shunted off on the trains, and then the trains were butchered, and then they were pushed here. But you know, even, uh, people who were in Delhi—Muslims were very well off— after all, you know, Delhi was where the Mughals were, you know? And rich, rich Muslim families were there. They were reduced to pauperism and thrown across to this side. And then they eventually, you know, because they were educated, and the country was new, they got good government posts and good positions, and you know, they got into railways—they became again prosperous, to an extent, and they fitted in well. So you know, everything sorted its own level.

Now my parents. You wanted to find out their relationship?

AC: Sure.

BS: Yeah? Uh, it was very strange. Uh, in all my growing up years, I did not ever hear my father address a comment to my mother, or talk to her. Things were always done in terms of signals, that, you know, my father would be, uh—you know, on one side was the kitchen, on the other side of the veranda and the portico was the bathroom. And there used to be a blind made out of little rushes, so that my father could see out but people couldn't see in, and he would carry on business sitting on his throne, from there. And when he was sitting on his throne, the cook would come in, and, you know, bring him his tea on the throne, and things like that would go on. And uh, we children would go and sit on his lap, and things like that also.

[Sound of dog scratching on the floor] And, uh, even then—at that time, sort of, okay now he's sitting here, so my mother would go and tell the cook, 'You better start preparing his egg.' And his egg had to be prepared just so, and everything in the house was done to cater to him, you know. And, uh, I mean, because he grew up in such extreme poverty, he was very, very tight with his money. Even when he became one of the wealthiest men in Pakistan, even then he was still very—because the brewery was a very thriving institution. He was still a very stingy man, with the result I would go to my friends' houses, and they had flush toilets and air conditioners. Our house still had, you know, chamber pots and the sweeper would come and take away the pan, and you know, things like that. And I used to feel so envious of my friends, you know, they had such better facilities and things.

And my mother, you know—and then, you see, as my—the richer my father became, uh—he was not an attractive man, but, you know, when you are very wealthy you become very attractive. So, suddenly, uh, a lot of women would come to see him, and he became a little popular, and I think he had affair or two, because I heard our parents fighting, and, 'Okay, no Janna (?), I won't let you go out today,' my mother would say.

[Choking up] Anyway, these were silly incidents, you know...And then, uh, when – when my father got control of the brewery, and by the time he had gathered all the – all the lawyers—the bright, young lawyers, and they fought the cases, and they eventually got hold of the brewery. And it became his, you know? So that by the time I grew up, and got married, and I got married in India—now the partition affected, when you were in border towns, everybody's life. And because I got married to an Indian, and my father died, and I was in India, as an Indian, I could not inherit anything. My brothers became billionaires, you know, my, uh, my brother, who was, sort of, just a year younger than me, was at Oxford at that time. He had to be called back, and he was put in charge of the brewery. Of course at that time he also had a bit of a tussle, everybody tried to grab the brewery from him because it was so greed—but he was, he was successful, because all the lawyers were with him again.

But I came over, and I could not inherit anything, so it affected my life in a very strange way. And strangely, when I

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

used to go, with a big stomach, to visit my parents, you know, from Bombay to Lahore, my father would sit there and say, 'Come and settle down here. Come and settle here.' I said, 'Fath—you know, how can I do that, Daddy?' 'Bring the children here!' I said, 'How can I bring the children here? Their father is there.' 'Bring him here! Bring him here!' Because he knew that I could not inherit anything, you see? So he wanted to protect me, in a way. And I could not make head or tail of him—of what he was saying. I said, 'Has he gone mad?' He's saying, you know, 'Divorce him, bring him.' I said, 'How can he leave his factory and come here?' My husband had a cold storage and ice factory, I said, 'How can he come here?'

If he had said, 'You won't inherit anything,' I was also, you know, idealistic nineteen-year-old sort of thing, and you know, I, I would have never—to me, you know, at that age money doesn't matter, you know, the way you're brought up, it just doesn't matter. I would've said, 'How dare you say such things? It doesn't matter to me.' So he didn't even say it that way, you see? And it is much later, when I grew, uh, much older that I realized, uh-oh, I wish I had more money, you know [laughs]? So, you see, it inherit—it, uh, affected my life.

It affected—again, the partition meant my two children who were born there were Indian children. And, again, [crying] oh my God, I start crying again. They did not let me take my son away. You see? My son was three years old. And they said, 'You get out, and your children— your daughter you can take, but you will not take our son away, because the son is very precious to us.' And they kept my son behind—you know, [choking up again] this is what partition does to each family. So that I spent these years and I got married to him, I produced another little girl, but for years and years I grieved for my son. Because, you know, we had a, uh, you know, at the time of divorce, they would send him. He came over when he was about three and a half, and within a week we got telegrams, that 'We hear you're going to kidnap him.' And, 'Send him back,' and, 'send him back.' And we had to send him back.

And then...there were two wars between India and Pakistan—three wars, actually. And neither could I go there, nor—and they didn't bother to think of sending the boy here. So that I saw him when he was three, and then uh, a Parsee family—now people can be, uh, sadistic. A Parsee family visited Bombay, he was a judge, you know, they were educated people.

And he and his wife, when they came back they said, 'Oh, we stayed opposite where your son was staying.' And my first husband—we, you know, broken up because he was in love with a Indian Jewish woman, and he had married her. And they said, 'Oh, we, we lived with our relatives in a house exactly opposite them.' You know, they had sky—very tall buildings in Bombay. And the people we were staying with, they told us that the stepmother would beat the boy with bamboos. Your son.

Now this also was a time of war, and I just went berserk, and I took my husband and we went to, uh, Islamabad, and we went to the foreign office, and you know, I was saying, 'Please do something! Rescue my son, rescue my son!' And they said, 'We are at war! If we could go, we would do it! How can we do anything? We can't do anything.' You know? Is—is this all relevant? What am I talking nonsense.

AC: Anything about your life is relevant.

BS: Uh-huh? And uh then, uh, the war was over, and he turned ten. And his—you know, we Parsees have an initiation ceremony when they tie a thread round the waist, and we wear undergarments, you know, we are supposed to wear it all the time. We women throw it away very soon. Anyway, so his ceremony was to take place, so then I took my younger daughter, and my older daughter, who was with us—now she went through a very hard time, too.

That's another story. She was Indian. So we had to do her citizenship—I felt my whole life went away filling in forms, doing visa forms, my God.

Anyway, we went there, and there was this chubby sweet, little boy, you know? And, uh, happy little fellow, and then as we were going up, you know, I sort of took him aside, I said, 'Is Naomi good to you? She's nice?' He said,

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

‘Oh yeah, oh yeah,’ you know, like that. So I knew these people had talked rubbish, you know? And the—his grandpar—father, the grandmother, who said, ‘We’ll never let him go. He’s our dear son—grandson, we’ll never let him go,’ she had not even looked after him. And he had been brought up by this Naomi, who had been nice to him, kind to him. They’d had two children of their own by this time, and all—

Then again, we came back and we were at war again. And no way of seeing my son again. Until—you know we couldn’t go across, nothing happened, and suddenly we heard that my husband died. When my son was sixteen. My first husband, you know? So that time I got visa on compassionate grounds, and I went over. And I was so shocked, because by now—they took me along, his aunts, and his grandmother, they were fighting with Naomi, you know. Now they were clashing over his possessions. And they took me along to see, this is how this is happening, and they took my son, Coco (?) is his name, he is living in Houston now.

[Tearing up again] And they made him sit on a stool, you know, outside. And they took me inside, and they were saying, ‘Coco (?) has no sense, he can’t run this business, he can’t do this,’ and I say, ‘How dare you say that about my child? Is that how you’ve been talking about him? Even a sane child would become dumb if you’re keeping on talking about him like that.’ You know? It was a horrible thing they were doing. But, anyway, what happened was that my son, now he was a strapping sixteen year old, and I had left him, you know, three and then ten, and I couldn’t relate to this young man! You know, he was—and I would just look, I couldn’t talk, I couldn’t do anything. And eventually, he got under me, you know, I tried to hug him, and I couldn’t. But he hugged me. And he said, ‘Mama, this is how you hug.’ You know? [Crying] And—and he drew me out, it was amazing. [Blows nose]

I had so much pent-up emotion. I couldn’t relate to him, I couldn’t—I just wanted to, you know,

I didn’t—I wanted to be with him, hug him, hug him, but I didn’t know how. He was too grown up. You know? And—anyway. So that all ended happily, you know, thank God, you know. People had lost their children, and here I was, I found my child, you know. But you know, this was a long period of acute agony I went through. What is happening to my child? When will I get my child back?

We have a lot of saints, and saints, uh pilgrimage places, you know, where saints are buried. And I would go from one place to the other—people would take me, and I would go there, and I would just pray that I could get my son back, you know? And I would keep on, and I would go to all these, so-called, sort of, uh wise people, and say, ‘When will I get my son back?’

And at one point, yes, before all this happened, we had a very—an argent from Bombay, a very wise man came to Lahore. Parsee, of our faith. Now we have such few people we don’t have really saints—living saints. But here was a man who was sort of a living saint. And, again, with him I asked, you know, ‘When will I get my son back?’ type of thing. And he was an amazing man, he had power, you know? He had a certain power. And he said, ‘Very shortly.’ And uh after I went—after meeting—he was at my mother’s house, he was staying there, the whole Parsee—my mother was a sort of leader of the community, and all the Parsees had gathered with her.

Then, when I went back to my house, I had a dream—now this is very stupid, but I had a dream. And, it was as if I had entered a stage of absolute bliss, which I wasn’t aware of, but I heard somebody awakening me, saying, ‘Bapsi! Bapsi!’ And, the only time that I became aware of the stage of bliss was when I was getting conscious. And, I was feeling so regretful I don’t want to leave that. Although I was not conscious of that, I didn’t want to leave it, but I was drawn back to life, in a way, to awareness. And, that took away my entire fear of death. You know, it was immediately after meeting this man that I went there, and it gave me a sense of peace; it took away my fear of death.

As, you know, as a child, you never feel you will die. You don’t have the vulnerability, but at the same time, the back of your mind, there is something. No, I was not a child. At that time, I already come back to Pakistan. [I] had children, you know. But, my son wasn’t with me, you know. My other daughter was grown up. And, yeah, I—, it was a spiritual experience, definitely. And, I felt if I had to die, I would end at that wonderful stage of, um, Nirvana, or Bodhi, or whatever the Buddhists call it, you know, that stage of absolute bliss which you enter into, you know. So—,

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

oh, god, I'm rambling. Sorry. One and a half hour is over. Two hours is over?

AC: No, we are just approaching one hour, actually.

BS: Okay, any other questions?

MV: Um, did your son go back with you to Pakistan after he--?

BS: He came to Pa-. Again, that was a trauma. I had to go to, uh, to Delhi to get him a visa to come to Pakistan. I got him the visa. I did everything. And then, you see, you had to go the Wagah border, you know, the border from which you will cross over. And, I'd go there every day, [but] he wouldn't arrive. Then, I eventually again phone Bombay, [and] said, 'What's happening,' you know. And, the grandmother and the -- and uh, Naomi had called him back. 'No, you are needed. You have to, you know, be here and listen to these people, and be with the lawyers,' and all that nonsense, you know. And then, again, got him all involved in those sort of things, you know. And, eventually, you know I fought, and I, you know, did so much of a scene created. Eventually, after three months, he was sent to Lahore.

He came to Lahore. He lived with us for about, uh, almost eight months. Six to eight months. But, it was too different from Bombay; too different. He, he-, I mean, uh, his sister was of course then, you know, the older sister. There was just the difference of a year and a month between him and his older sister. And, she had a lot of friends. So, you know, he had a bit of-, you know, he had friends and companionships, but he did not know the language of Lahore, where people talk in Punjabi. He had grown up in, uh, you know, in Bombay, where people would talk in Gujarati. And, he felt a total misfit because he was, uh, a dancing, different type of a child, and here was a very somber atmosphere in Lahore, you know.

And-, and of course every boy of that age, at sixteen and seventeen, their whole heart and soul is,

'Oh, let me go to America,' you know. And, he said, 'I want to go to America.' So, you know, we got him-. We had some good American friends. They got him a visa. And, we sent him and my older daughter to Twin Falls, Idaho because it was Mormon territory--no coffee, no drinking, no smoking--so we thought they'd be safe out there [laughs]. So, we sent them to school out there.

MV: When did you first come to America?

BS: Uh, we moved to America-. My husband moved much earlier. I was much more reluctant to move because I was already a very, very popular writer in Lahore. And, my-, all the-. You know, the French ambassador was translating my book. And, you know, all the embassy people would invite me, and, you know, I was very much there in the writing scene. And, I was the first writer to come up in Pakistan, you know, and to have-, to be published in Britain, and to be published also in America. And, it was a very freak thing that to have a writer living in Lahore to get published, [just as it is for] a Pakistani writer to get published in America. They said it was almost a miracle for that to happen, you know.

So, this was a zone of comfort. And, also, a woman is somehow much more tied to the earth, to her relatives, to her belonging, you know. That atmosphere, I was much more tied [to it]. And my husband, for some reason, was of a more adventurous frame of mind, and he wanted to experience a new country although he was very successful-, doing very successfully there [in Pakistan]. He got into pest-control, agriculture, pest-control, things like that, you know. And, he then moved here with-. We had, you know, a whole bunch of martial laws in Lahore. We didn't have a democracy. We hardly had democracy when Ayub Khan took over and a military rule-, and took over as a martial law.

And, at that time, one of my husband's friends was a martial law administrator. [He was] very well acquainted with the Americans, so then the both of them moved to America. And, they wandered around with rugs around their

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

shoulders. They moved to Charleston in the Carolinas, going from house to house selling rugs over their shoulder—they had rugs and the keys of their cars. And, they were selling rugs. And, uh, very happy to be here, you know [laugh]. And uh, I came, visited them, went away, visited them. And then, uh my daughter and I stayed for a little while, my older daughter. And, she went to school for a little while there. And, uh—, not my younger daughter. She went to school. But, we found we were coughing very badly in Charleston. We were staying in a rough area, or maybe that, uh, the things—that fungus sort of thing going off trees—

MV: Umm.

BS: —we were allergic to them. So, then we moved to Atlanta. And, I was sort of semi-move, semi-move, but Atlanta was lovely. I fell in love with it, you know. It's the first time I experienced total freedom as a woman; in a sense, freedom, you know. I had my little car, and I could go wandering off into the forests, those beautiful pine forests, and turn on the radio. And, I had just been introduced to, to uh Beethoven. Otherwise, I was all steeped in Indian music, and Kawadi, and things. And, I suddenly saw the beauty of Beethoven's Symphony, and the Fifth, you know.

(01:10:15)

And, I would just turn that on and wander and drive my car through the mountains. And, it was a period of absolute bliss, you know. Again, to be in that gorgeous—. Have you been to Atlanta?

MV: Yes.

BS: Ahhh. You know, to be in those forest, and those—. You've been also?

AC: No.

BS: Oh to be those woods with the red earth underneath, and the hills, and—. It was something magical, you know. I loved it. But, Atlanta, nothing happened. It doesn't have some sort of energy, you know. I'd already been published here. I'd not been to America, and I was still published, my *Crow Eaters* was first published, and then *The Bride—The Pakistani Bride*. St. Martin's Press published. You know, I was not here. When you are not here, you know, they don't do anything for the book. They hardly sent it out for reviews, but there was a lady called Lori Cullen (?). She was a writer, and she was a cookbook writer. And, she read *The Crow Eaters* and fell in love with it. And, she passed it around. She told me after twelve years that, 'I passed it around to reviewers and had it reviewed.' Otherwise, St. Martin's [would] let it fall through the cracks, you know. If...if the author isn't here, probably that's what they would do.

And, nothing happened, you know. Some friends tried to introduce me to the Atlanta newspaper. And, with great difficulty, they reviewed *The Bride*, which had just come out, you know, in America. And, then, you know, my husband's also, you know—, he did some business, also, there, with some friends, and it wasn't doing well. And, the rug business, they had given over by that time. And, we had relatives in Houston, and they said, 'Why don't you move here?' And, Houston had a different energy. Things moved at once. You know, I mean, the, the writers at the creative writing department [at the University of Houston]: Philip Lopate, Rosellen Brown, Donald Barthelme. They all sort of took me in hand, and uh I started teaching. And, Rosellen Brown was marvelous. You know, she wrote that book, *Before and After*, which became a film with uh Liam Neeson and all. And, she would tell me, 'Okay, apply for this, uh—.' Is it all right if I talk on my stay here—?

MV: Oh, sure.

BS: —in America?

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

MV: Well, we want you to talk about that some, too.

BS: Okay, okay. So, you see, Houston—, suddenly I had this little group of writer friends. Phillip Lopate was—, is an essayist. He has written that very famous book of essays, which is taught, and taught widely, you know. He, he compiled essays of other people in that book. [Unintelligible] essays and all that. And, Rosellen Brown was quite a famous writer, and she was teaching there. And, she told me, ‘Apply for this, the NEA.’ Then, she told me, ‘Apply for the Bunting Fellowship at Harvard.’ And, she was very happy because everything I applied for, I got. You know, because I’d written two really, rather, very good books, so if—. You know, they are already classics in our part of the world, in Indian Subcontinent. Uh, *The Crow Eaters*, and, uh, *Ice Candy*—. No, no, *Crow Eaters* and *Pakistani Bride*.

So, these books were sent to, to you know, to the people at the Bunting Institute, Harvard, and all. And, at once, I was at the Bunting Institute. Then the person at, uh—, in charge of the Harvard business—, uh, Harvard creative writing department, as soon as he read *The Crow Eaters*, he says, ‘Oh, but you must teach here.’ I said, ‘I’ve never taught before.’ He didn’t believe me, you know. And, I was very hesitant, you know. I hadn’t not myself been through uh college, really, you know, because I have not been through school, and been through Kinnaird College, which was—. I have not learned the discipline of sitting down in school. So, I couldn’t sit down there, even. I would just escape from the class, and run around the hockey field. By the time I was eleven, or ten, even. I was—, I became—, my polio had gone. I became very healthy. And, we had a house in the mountains. And, we would—, I—, we would be mountaineering, and I was very healthy, you know. What was I talk...

Yeah, so, you know, I went to Cambridge. And, you know, after you went through my [laugh]—. Uh, I forget. His name is Engel, Professor Engel, and he was in charge of the creative writing department. And, he said, ‘You genuinely haven’t taught.’ I said, ‘I told you. I have not taught.’ He said, ‘This is Harvard. I can’t give the writing professorship here.’ And, by this time, the fellowship finished, and the money from the—, this thing, also finished; uh NEA grant finished. And, I needed money. And, for some reason, Columbia University in New York offered me a job. So, I went there, a total rookie, you know, I mean not knowing how to teach. And, I was given a post to teach their doctorate students.

And, Phillip Lopate had also gone, by this time, to New York. He was a New Yorker. He hated Houston. He went back to New York, you know. And, I would cry. And, I said, ‘Just before my class, I get a panic attack. I can’t breathe,’ you know. I mean, these were graduate students, you know, and they were writing novels. Of course, I was, I was very good at the craft of—, at the art of writing, but I didn’t know the language of writing, how to teach writing. So, I quickly, quickly made me read books on—. He made me also, uh—, what do they call it, when you attend their classes when they are teaching? Audit. I audited a couple of classes and all. But that doesn’t teach you to—, how to teach. Then, I read a whole bunch of books [on] how to create characters.

This is after I have written three and a half—, two and a half books. I was already writing, uh, *Cracking India*. So, I’d—, uh, you know—. And, how to create characters, how to create, uh, tension. You know, things like that, which I’ve—, because I’d read so much as a child, writing came automatically to me. It was — it was as—, I just sat down and write my—. You know, I got divorced. I came to, uh—, back to Pakistan. I went on my second honey—you know, my mother was distraught. Oh my god, a girl, unmarried girl again in the house, a divorcee. And, my husband was apparently very much in love, you know. He was a very handsome man at that stage. But, I was still married, you know, when he fell in love with me. So, I gone back to Bombay.

Anyway, then, when I was finally divorced and my mother made me marry him, we went on our honeymoon to the Karakoram Highway, which is along the old Silk Road. It — these are the most—, the tallest mountains, the most tumultuous mountains of the world. After the Everest, the twenty highest peaks, the Nanga Parbat, the K-2. K-2 is, you know, the roughest mountain in the world, more difficult in any other. All these—the second highest peak— these were all in the Karakoram. And, our honeymoon was spent there. And, this army was building—. This man was sixteen years old at that time, you know, when the partition took place, and told me these stories. He was in charge

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

of the Karakoram highway that was being built. The Chinese were building it from one end, and the Pakistanis were carrying it on from there. And, they had employed the tribe.

Now, these are wild, wild people. These are the pre-Taliban Talibans, you know. And, we were on this side of the Indus. That side of the Indus was unadministered territory. And, Indus was gorgeous: a mile wide stretch of tumultuous waters. And, where they built a camp; the army built a camp, uh, there was a lagoon. The Indus had formed a lagoon. Otherwise, we—, it was a torrent – you know it was going through torrents. And, one day we went on a raft. No boats could go there, but we went on a raft on the Indus. And, suddenly on the opposite bank, like as if they sprang from the earth, a group of men sprang up like—, like that, with guns in their hands. Now, these are wild tribes, you know, they are gun-happy. These are the fellows who the British couldn't defeat, who the Americans couldn't defeat, who routed the Russians out of Afghanistan. They are these people. And, these people suddenly sprang out of the earth on the opposite bank.

And, our—, and we had pickets on top guarding us. On mounted docks. And, one picket on top shouted, you know. And, our raft man said, 'We have to go back. We have to go back.' And, you know, he pointed that these are dangerous people, you know, so we quickly went back. And the pickets were guarding us. Otherwise, we were intruders in their territory. This was no man's land. It is still no man's land, you know. And, they could have easily shot us. In spite the presence of the Army; in spite everything, you know. So, when we were there, I learned about these people talk to—. There was a Army major, Army doctor. They talked to us about the tribals, you know, and they told us the story of a little girl. They said, 'You know, when—, a month back, a little girl from the Punjab was brought here.'

And, you know, the Punjabis are my color, your color [pointing at Arthur]. You know, we—, they—. And, this, uh, and the tribals are your color [pointing at Melissa], they are very fair. So, this little girl was brought here by an old tribesman. And, there were conscripts working on the road, Punjabi conscripts. And, they would say, 'What is this old tribal doing with a little Punjabi girl here?' She was about fifteen, sixteen years old. So, they took them straight away to the major. And, the major asked questions to the tribal, to the girl. The girl, of course, you know, very, very shy, very timid. And, you know, little girl—. Pakistani girls are very timid and very shy because they are not allowed to talk to men. Even their fathers stayed out of the homes; the women folks stayed indoors, you know, things like that.

And, uh, he's—, the man said, 'I'm taking across the Indus to get her married into my tribe—, my cousins, or my tribes.' And, the major asked the girl, you know—, we weren't there, but this was the major asking the girl, uh 'Is it okay?' So, she so shy, she nodded that she was happy; she was not unhappy, you know. Aft-, and, then, a month later, they heard the girl had run away. Now, these people live by a code of honor, a *very* stern code of honor. That's the only way they can survive. There's no doctors, no law and order as you would—, we would know it—, no, no courts. So, if a stream is coming down a mountain side, and is feeding one village, then goes through another village—, if somebody takes away that stream, they wouldn't do it. If they do it, the punishment would be death because that whole village would die, from whom the stream was taken away. So, they live by a very strict code of honor. So, a runaway wife is uh like a theft, and the punishment for theft is also—you kill somebody. If something is stolen, you kill that person there because—, and that is why they have no theft, nothing because all these villages live near each other by their strict code of honor. But, this girl ran away, which is an intolerable insult in their code of honor.

Much, much later, after I'd written the whole story, when I came back to the plains. Uh, well, anyway, a month later, after she run away, the whole point of narrating this story to me was: she survived in those mountains for three weeks. Now, in those mountains, if you or I placed in those mountains, and turn us around, we would not know where to go, but—, no footpaths, no paths. And, these mountain—, these people are like mountain goats; they know everything, you know, but even they would get lost. But, this girl somehow found her way to the Indus. This is what the Army presumes. And, then, because they found her head, uh, cut, and her body decapitated on the shore of the Indus on the other side. And, then they realized—. They heard the girl had run away, and if the girl had crossed the

bridge--.

They were rope bridges, you know; literally rope. Two ropes and little ropes across. If she had managed to cross the bridge, the Army would have saved her, you know. They were all really looking out for the girl because they had heard she had run away. But then, when they found her body, then they knew that-- Well, they have discovered how her-- And, the punishment for death is death. And, when I came back to Lahore, this girl's story haunted me. The gorgeous, this at-- The scenery was, again, something-- It was a mystical experience. Again, you walk in those mountains, and you feel you don't want to come back. You just want to be there, you know. So, I wanted to describe these mountains and tell this girl's story. And, I thought I'd write a short story. And, as I was writing, I realized-- how did the girl exist? She must have had parents.

How did she meet the tribals? So, you know, creating her background: who were her parents, how did she grew up, where did she grew up, who was this uh tribesman, how did she meet him. In creating all that, I have created part of the novel. And, then I wrote the other part of the novel where she goes with the tribesman to the mountains. And, this became *The Pakistani Bride*, my first novel. And, that's how I became a writer, and then I wrote *The Crow Eaters*.

Anyway, so then I taught at Columbia University. Panic attack after panic attack, and then uh Phillip Lopate said, 'You better give up and write. Go away,' you know. So, one term finished, and I ran to Houston, you know. I just escaped. And, then, I started teaching-- I took a job after teaching at Columbia, at St. Thomas University. A total little rookie program of theirs. Every-- No, and then, Rice University. I taught there at their continuing--, and there's a woman called Chao, a Chinese lady. You-- What's her name?

AC: Anne Chao.

MV: Anne Chao.

BS: Huh?

AC: Anne Chao.

BS: Yeah, so she was a rookie. And, she said, 'Bapsi, you've taught at Columbia. Come and teach our continuing ed students.' And, she enrolled sixty students. And, when I saw the sixty students, I said, 'I can do line editing.' That's how I started--, ended up teaching again. I said, 'I can do that. I mean I can teach them as they're writing: this is right, this is wrong,' you know. But, sixty papers, I can't do. So, we divided them into two classes: A and B. So, thirty each. And, you know, she had no idea. She was new, I was new. And, I finally started teaching these thirty people, you know. And, this was very--.

In a way, it was a charming experience because all these were adults. They were lawyers; they were, uh--, there was one CIA agent. One, uh--, and they were teachers, professors. They were all wanting to learn creative writing because the lawyers would say, you know, 'Our writing is so dreary and dull. We want to do something more charming than this.' And, again, the professors of English would say, you know 'Our writing is now so academic and stilted. We want to break into fiction,' you know. And, for me, fiction was easy, you know, sort of thing. So, I had great fun with them. And then, I was also at that same time teaching at the University of Houston.

And, Donald Barthelme one day said, 'Come on. I'll take you for lunch.' And, I went with him for lunch. And, he said, 'You know, we've invited Michener.' I said, 'Ah, how wonderful!' And then, he said, 'You know, we are going to do a little fundraiser.' Not fundraiser, he said, 'We are collecting money.' And, first, I forget exactly what he said. He said, 'And, we have collected four thousand dollars;' very proud. So, you know, I'd just gone also from Pakistan there. And, you know, as a Pakistani wife, we used to do a lot of charitable work. I used to work in women's and children's institute and orphanages. And, we used to uh do fundraisers for these institutes and have

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

charitable galas.

So, when he said we've raised four thousand dollars, I said, 'Four thousand dollars,' in shock, okay, 'that's all? [With] Michener's name?' And, he said, 'Yes.' He was very proud, 'We've raised four thousand dollars.' He was very proud of it. I said, 'You should be raising forty thousand dollars.' He said— He was quite confused. Donald Barthelme was a very big name writer, you know. I don't know, but he has taught at a lot of creative writing schools. He is the first one who started this absurd writing era. And, uh, he said, 'How?' I said, 'You know, I teach at Rice, and all these ladies are all the time talking of— I heard them talking of, uh, opera gala, of symphony gala, zoo gala, you know. I've heard them talking. And, to my mind, it made sense that they are having galas [to] raise funds also.'

So, I said, 'I'll introduce you to people who will help you raise this sort of money.' So, the whole faculty he invited, you know, and I invited these ladies who were at the continuing ed, who were doing these galas. Because I talked to them. I said, 'You know, uh, I talked to Donald Barthelme.' 'Of course,' they were in creative writing, you know, and they were — he was god to them. And, I said, 'He doesn't know how to raise money, and I thought you could help him make a gala.' They said, 'Oh, yes, yes.' So, then, they became two camps fighting among themselves, you know, each wanting to be—. Anyway, the two camps game landed up there. And, they were sitting around the table, and the faculty were sitting around the table. And, they talked. And, you know, they said—. [phone rang] Excuse me. [recorder paused]

[recording resumed] 'We'll do this. We'll do this. We organize this. We organize that.' And, they started to—. As they were going away, this Donald Barthelme looking totally befuddled, and he said to me, 'How much do these ladies charge?' I said, 'They are not going to charge. They are very wealthy women. And, they will do this for free.'

'But, why?' He could not understand. You know, he was very naive. He said, 'Why? Why would the women do it for free?' I said, 'Because they want to be with writers.' They would— They were doing creative writing classes. I was teaching them, and they want to be associated with you, [and be] associated with other writers you invite. And, they will help you make your first gala.' And, they had a—. They—. Yeah, this, this all—, I'm getting it now. [I was] a little confused. Yeah, I went away. I was teaching, and then I started to teach at Mount Holyoke and Brandeis University. I went away, and the gala took place without me, but they raised \$64,000. And, they formed Inprint.

I don't know if you have heard of it. Inprint is a huge, uh— again, all the very wealthy women—people who live on South Boulevard, and North Boulevard, and, you know, not in River Oaks. These very wealthy people in these Boulevard areas [with] all the money. They had found this organization called Inprint. And, this is for inviting brand name writers. They have invited Rushdie twice. They've invited all the top American writers. And, they have them, these huge meetings at, uh, at these, you know, Jones Hall, and places like that. And, they had, you know, two thousand, three thousand people attend. And, this is what I still find very freakish. When I go to those—. I became a, of course, you know, one of the founding members on their board. Now, I'm just on the advisory board. I would go to these humongous places where people would come to listen to these writers, and the whole crowd would be white.

You know, where I live, I would be with Hispanics, with all sorts of mixed people, but when I went to these events, or when I went to symphonies, or operas, or—the crowd were always white, you know. So this made me realize that Houston is so divided. You go, now even, to Inprint meeting with all these big name writers. Come, you would just pay— you would [need money to] invited them. You pay five dollars, and [go to] this huge house there. And there, they hold these magnificent galas. They invite British writers. They each— pay each writers, besides their, you know, business class fare, they pay them uh thirty thousand, twenty thousand dollars as cash, you know. It has become a huge, humongous organization now. So, you know, how things steamroll when— like, here I was, a Pakistani with new experiences coming to Houston, and able to form Inprint, you know, something which is now such a, such a— I mean every short while when they have a gala, the newspaper, the *Houston Chronicle*, is full of photographs of that.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

This multicultural influence, you know— where are you from [looking at Arthur]?

AC: China.

BS: China. Now, look at the Chinese influence here. You know, the amazing thing is, the Chinese are so popular in Pakistan. Did you know that?

AC: A little bit, yeah.

BS: Yeah? They have taken—oh, the Russians couldn't, the Americans couldn't, you know. Quartered, Pakistan has been quartered. Across the Strait of Hormuz—you know, the Strait of Hormuz is a narrow strip of ocean through which all the oil goes through to America, from Saudi Arabia, from—everywhere. That is why the Russians became so friendly with Afghanistan. You know— my god, I'm talking endlessly, but there is so much I have— history of that part of the world. We have two Afghan children as our wards. And Afghanistan at that time was under the Russian influence. And, it was a very benign influence because when we— we would go— we would be invited, uh— these were the children of the Russian—of the Afghan Deputy Prime Minister.

His daughter was going to Kinnaird College, you know, my old college. Of course, by this time, my daughter was going to Kinnaird College. My daughter was still young. And, their son was going to what was known as the Chiefs' College. That boy was naughty. He would keep running away to the Soviet Union, all the time. The girl was very happy. And, she would wear shorts, jeans, you know. Our Pakistani girls wouldn't, but she would. And then, the parents would invite us to Afghanistan. And, we would go there. And, the women in Kabul itself were wearing dresses. No burka, nothing. If we went to— then he—then they will take us to his ancestral village, not very far away.

We went there. There, you know, we would pass village women who would cover their faces if they saw cars pass, you know. They won't be wearing burkas, but they would cover their faces. The Russians have built something called the Salang Pass from, from uh, Russia. You know, they had opened up Afghanistan. And, at that time, they had, they had no visions of— they did want access into Pakistan, to the warm waters because they had no warm water port. And, you know, at that time, this fellow had— this Deputy Prime Minister speaking to us had said, 'People tell us, 'Why don't you go over to America? Why are you with Russia?' We said, 'No, no.' Even the Americans and the Russians have said they have divided the world between them. Afghanistan is, uh, with the Soviet Union; Pakistan is with Americans.

Americans and Pakistan were absolute brother-brother friendship at that time. And, uh, absolutely, it was such a benign, good influence on uh the Afghans, the Russian influence. You know, totally different influence. Then, of course, the Americans got very anxious. They thought the Russians want to come in— god knows what they thought. They knew the Russian influence was creeping up, and they started paying— now, this is a fact, you may not, as an American, like to hear it [looking at Melissa], but they started paying the Afghans to make a sort of insurrection against the king who was there. And, the king was thrown away. Then, uh, Russia then appointed some sort of man in charge there. And then they said, 'Look, the Afghans aren't ruling. They've become puppets.' You know, then, the Americans created a lot of mishap because they wanted the Russians out. And, between them— have you seen *Charlie Wilson's War*?

MV: Mmm, no.

BS: See that film. It tells you what America did. You know, in order to... Anyway, *Charlie Wilson's War*—again, this happened at Rice. Rice has a very—one of the Pakistani girls ask me, invited me to talk of—I forget, something or the other. There was a huge gathering of people. You know, they invited people to talk, and she invited me to give a talk there. And, I had talked of this incident, you know, of, uh—at that time, *Charlie Wilson's War* and all had not happened.

Houston Asian American Archive

Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

And, I talked of that, you know, Afghanistan was [under] such a, you know, benign influence. And then, this America got rid of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was the Prime Minister of Pakistan, who we all loved. And I, as a Parsee minority woman—women loved him, poor people loved him. He was like a god to people. America got rid of him and appointed General Zia.

You know, they do this. You know, they got rid of Mosaddegh from Iran, who was such a democratic person, and installed the Shah of Iran, a very cruel man, and SAVAK. So, they did the same thing to Pakistan. They had this fellow— you know, this fellow came on our television—by this time, I was about—shaking a letter, say, ‘Look, I accepted this letter written by the Americans.’ And, it was written, ‘Get rid of this fellow,’ whatever it was. And, they appointed General Zia who was in charge of the Army. They appointed him the Prime Minister because they wanted an Army man to fight the war in Afghanistan, you see. And, they had Zulfikar Ali put in prison, then killed. This was Prime Minister Bhutto’s father, who we all worshipped, you know, the lovely Bhutto. Then, when America—. Then, when the war was fought—.

Now, I was talking about this at Rice. And, god knows what all I said. I was a candid talker. I said all this. And then, some woman came toward me. She said, ‘Do you know who did this war?’ ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘they were two Americans, apparently, who, uh, did a lot help to promote something.’ I did mention. And, they said, ‘Do you know you are talking of the two Americans, Joanne Herring—I think I took her name. I forget now how it happened. They said, ‘We know Joanne Herring and Charlie Wilson.’ Now, these were the two Texans who galvanized the parliament to— you see, the Americans were just giving little little mischievous things. They did not think ever that the Afghans could throw out the Russians. The Russians had come out with; by now, that become a full scale war. You know, the irritation had taken place. And, the Russians brought tanks in, and, you know, things like that.

And, the Mujahedeen were being, you know, funded by the Americans. And, they were being thrown in. And then, the Americans did another very cruel thing. I’m sorry I have to tell you this, but they, with Saudi Arabia, they published—Wahhabiism is a very rabid form of Islam, Wahhabi Islam, Saudi Arabia’s Islam. In places like Pakistan, we have, uh, Sufi Islam, where people dance and sing, and, you know, different type of Islam. But, this is a very stern Islam. And, by this time, between that war, there were two million Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran. Three million in Pakistan, one million in Iran, four million refugees [in total].

So, the Americans and Saudi Arabia in Idaho or Ohio or somewhere, printed these horrible little Wahhabi Qurans. And, the Saudi sent over the Mullahs to these camps to set up the madrasas. That’s where the madrasas started: in these camps. Because the Americans thought, the CIA thought: no way will the Russians ever be pulled back. They are a big mighty force. But, we will train future generations of Mujahedeen. [That’s what] they used to call them. They were very proud of these warriors, then, Mujahedeen. We will train these Mujahedeen to fight the Russians for centuries. They will be cannon fodder, the Mujahedeen. The Mujahedeen, who became the Taliban, who, who were the ones who were indoctrinated with this Wahhabi Islam and became the Taliban, the stern Islamic people who said, ‘Bury your wives and, uh this thing—.’ You know, they were taught this horrible Islam.

And, America is totally to blame for the Taliban, you know. They are not acknowledging it now, but at that time, they invited the Taliban, who was their—anyway, anyway, this was—I’m going off the tangent, but this is where they told me, ‘We will introduce you to Joanne Herring and Charlie Wilson.’ You must see this film, *Charlie Wilson’s War*. And then, I went and saw Joanne Herring.

She was one of those, you know, southern belles, you know. Of course, she was very old by the time I saw her, but apparently she had plastic surgery on each level of her face. She is still alive. She is still always in the papers. Beautiful still. So much plastic surgery, you know. But, she was married to one billionaire after another, and she was also born into a very rich family, et cetera, et cetera. And, Charlie Wilson was a Texan from Lubbock or some place like that, you know. And, he was the one— she ramped him. She was a ramp. She ramped him, and—.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Oh, the movie is lovely. And, she said, 'It's all true, but of course, Charlie Wilson was far below me. I would never marry him,' although he proposed to her many times, you know. Charlie Wilson was so much handsomer than Tom Hanks. Tom Hanks plays Charlie Wilson, and uh Julia Roberts plays Joanna Herring. You know, I think they were both handsomer than Julia Roberts and Tom Hanks because I saw a documentary of this fellow. He was much taller and very good looking.

Anyway, they funded the war. And, you see, now Russia was, and America was after-. Now, Strait of Hormuz. Whoever controls them controls this narrow passage. That's why they are so angry at Iran because Strait of Hormuz is in Iran. That's why you know them, 'Urr, urr, urr [angry expression],' groaning at it. That is why they want control of Iran and got the Shah there, got Mosaddegh disposed, because Mosaddegh said, 'This is our right. We should control it from Russia.' America wanted it. The Chinese had quietly come in, and they have built the Gwadar Port in Pakistan. So this port is opposite the strait- this port guards, at one end, the Strait of Hormuz. It's on the strait. You see, Pakistan and Iran are very close, and the Strait of Hormuz is between them.

That is the end of Pakistan now. I don't know if China can even protect Pakistan, but, you know, Americans are very angry at Pakistan now. They would do anything to destroy it. I wouldn't be surprised. But, you know, this is world politics. Might is right. Whoever is mighty does that. When China becomes mighty, they would do the same things, I'm sure, you know. Every mighty power does these things. Anyway, I've talked too much. And, it's all recorded? What's with the recorder—this—it goes on and on?

AC: Yeah.

BS: Okay.

MV: Can you talk a bit about your involvement in the community in Houston, like, the Parsee community, or just the Asian community in general?

BS: Okay, now, uh, when we moved here from Pakistan, there is this very famous Sufi poet known as Rumi, and Allama Iqbal. These are mystic poets in Persian and Urdu languages. Now Allama Iqbal's son, who is- you know, these are contemporary [poets]. He is dead now, but his son lives there. And, he, he has a strong connection with *The Crow Eaters*. He loved it. He gave it the title. He led the manuscript. It was a long, another story, how it got published. He got it published by his Urdu press and all. [The Crow Eater was] written in English, but he had it published. Anyway, he-, when I came here, he gave me an introduction to Mrs. de Menil, owners of the Rothko Chapel, and Nabila Droubi. She used to run the Rothko Chapel at that time. He had been invited by them to give a lecture there. So, that is how he had met them and got to know them. And, he gave me a letter to them. We were still a little-, quite a big community here, but we have no place. Now, we are also, uh, known as fire worshippers.

We have temples, and the central-. It's one of the first prophetic religions in the world; pre-Abrahamic, you know, Zoroastrianism. And, fire is symbolic of god's light. So, we have our temple in which there's a altar in which the fire burns all the time, you know. It's never supposed to go out. So, you know, in places like Bombay, Karachi, even Lahore-. We have got an a hundred and ten year old fire temple in Lahore, you know, over a hundred and ten years. It's still there, you know. Still, that fire is tended. I just went to Lahore, and I went to pray there. But, we had no place here to pray.

And, when Mrs. de Menil came to know of it, she very sweetly said-. But, you know, we would meet a place somewhere, and we would hold little fire place, you know, where the whole community could gather. And, we would hold it in somebody's houses. And then, we found the houses are getting too small. So, she said, 'Why don't you hold it in the Rothko Chapel?' Now, this was amazing because- well, when I first saw the Rothko Chapel-. I came there, and Nabila Droubi took me there and introduced me. I said, 'What's wrong? Where are the paintings? Why have they covered everything with black cloth? Are they whitewashing the thing?' I thought those paintings were black cloths. You know, that what-, when you come from China, Pakistan, India, you think, 'What the hell is

Houston Asian American Archive

Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

this?’ Painting, you know, yeah.

Anyway, she said, ‘These are very precious paintings,’ and, ‘These are done by Rothko,’ and all that. And, you know, those precious paintings, she allowed us to hold our little prayers there. And, you know, there was quite a community, over three hundred people. And, we would—. We sat around, and we would have our prayer ceremonies done in the Rothko Chapel. And then, the community now is almost seven hundred people. So, we built, just across here, we built, on Airport Road, 610 and Airport, that area, or Highway 8 and Airport, a huge big Parsee center. And, my involvement in that is—. If you like, I’ll take you there one day. It’ll be worthwhile, if you want to talk of the Asian community here because there’s a very Zoroastrian presence here because of the center.

And, the center, the initial building was built by my brother who lives here. He is a land— he used to work in Ford Aerospace. He got educated in America. He used to work there. And then he was, uh—what do they call it—laid off from Ford Aerospace in California. And, he moved here. And, he was hardly thirty-three or something. He’s much younger to me. He is about— well now he is going to turn sixty, so I’m talking of time back. He came here, and he got a heart attack. You know, it was too much of a pressure: suddenly to be laid off, to be in a new city. And, he lived. My husband had moved here. And, I was not here. And, he collapsed on the thing, and they found out he had a heart attack. And then, he slowly, slowly went—. Again, he has got my father’s genes. Neither I, nor my older brother had it.

And, he started developing, went into business, and now he has become the richest, uh, Parsee in Houston. One of the richest, in any case, you know. And, he developed—all of Katy was developed by him. The streets, they are named after his children, you know. He has done that sort of thing. He developed the name. So, he built part of the center. Then, another doctor who came over from Michigan, he built the atrium. Then, somebody built the fire temple. Now, this is not a consecrated temple because, you know, our fire has to have lightning, and then the—, you grab two stones and make a fire, you know. It used to—it needs to be carried from one place to the other, and have a priest tend it twenty-four hours a day. And, we can’t afford that—to have that, you know.

So, it’s— you can go into that temple, but in that temple, because my brother built this place, although another lady built the temple, another doctor lady, my mother’s photograph is there in this temple. Otherwise, there are only images of, you know—Zarathustra was born two thousand five hundred before Christ. So, nobody knows what he looks like, like nobody knows what Christ looked like, you know. So, those are imaginary—, how people imagined him because Zoroastrianism took root in ancient Persia, which was Armenia, the Persian Empire, not where Iran is now, but where, I think, Armenia, Azerbaijan. He was born, in fact, in Balkh, or he died in Balkh, which is in Afghanistan. And, you know, uh it was also the cradle of Buddhism, it—uh Afghanistan.

You know, the beautiful statues, those Bamiyan statues. And, the stupas, all the way from Afghanistan to Taxila, Pakistan. Buddha stupas, all the way down Taxila, you know. These are historical sites where Buddha and, uh, Buddhism was prayed, where, uh, all the—. It’s a cradle of the world religions came down from there. Hinduism was not born in India. Hinduism was also born in Siberia, where Zoroastrianism was born, you know, the steps of central Siberia, Azerbaijan and then—. And then, one branch of theirs came into Iran as Zoroastrianism, and one branch came into India and brought the caste system and Hinduism into India. And, that is why today what Zoroastrians call—. They call their devil ‘Deva, Devata,’ which is the devil. The Hindu’s Deva, Devata is the god.

So, they have the same origins, but they branched out. Hinduism branched out into many gods, and into a different type of religion. In fact, in that all formed it was the caste system, where they treated the, the untouch—they turned all the indigenous population of India, which was dark. And, these were Aryans. These central Asians were in those days Aryans. So, they were light-skinned and blue-eyed when they came here. And, like the light-skinned and blue-eyed everywhere, they were, ‘We are superior to these darky Indians.’ So, they turned the original Indians into the untouchable caste, you see. And, that is how they became the Brahmins. And, Zoroastrianism preach one god—that’s how they broke up—and went to Iran. And then, Cyrus the Great and Darius, these were Persian Zoroastrian emperors. I talked too much. Enough, okay.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

MV: I think it might actually cut off soon.

BS: But, I'd love you to visit. I'd love you to visit our temple. And, and you know, you can meet Zoroastrian community. And, know that there is this Zoroastrian presence in Houston. I'll tell you one funny story and leave you. You know, we have a very ancient form of burial rituals known as the tower of silence. In Bombay, where there are a lot of Parsees, it's very famous there. The British know about this because they occupied India, but, you know, they are round structures, and the bodies are left there for the vultures and the crows to eat. It's a accepted form of burial in, uh, all over in Gujarat and India. And, in Karachi, where there are a lot of Parsees in Pakistan, we have two, three of these towers of silence. Now, when we came to America, there is no tower of silence, you know. So, these— we also have fanatics in our small little community. So, these fanatics came over from—Parsee Zoroastrian fanatics—came over from Bombay. Little community of a hundred and twenty in the whole world. And, they came here and all.

And, on PBS, they started talking, 'Oh, you know, we cannot—. The vultures in India are dying. They are all dying, I think, eating all the Parsee corpses that died, you know.' Because, you know, after all, all these antibiotics now that our bodies are getting—. I've made a lot of fun of this in *The Crow Eaters*. You should read that book. It's very funny. [quoting from the book] 'My grandfather's leg was left uneaten even, because the vultures, you know, are too sickly, too full.' Anyway. So, they started to make this noise in America. And, a few years back—this happened a few years back—so, one very rich rancher, he said, 'I'll give you as much land as you want on my ranch, and you bring that— you can build that tower of silence here.' And, you know, we all knew this is impossible. Those—our of seven hundred Parsees in Houston, how many corpses will you produce? Three a year? You know, how many towers—and, how would we get—nobody would allow the vultures, you know?

So, these brilliant fanatics, our Zoroastrian fanatics, they thought, 'What we will do, we build the tower. And, we'd build a moat around it.' And, the whole idea is supposed to be that, you know, we Parsees are supposed to be very charitable. They give a lot of money. All the rich—, Tatas, you know, the famous rich Indians. Tata family, have you heard of? They are very famous. They are Parsees. And, they built India. The built their whole, uh, steel mills, the cars, the airplane system, the Air India. Everything was built by the Parsees there, in India, you know. Wadias, Tatas, Gutteriges. They are the Parsee industrialists who built India, and they have given charity. And, that's how India—. Hindus would not give charity. Hindus would only give gold to their temples. They would never give to—. The Parsees have built India. They have given charity and built it.

So, they say that, 'Oh, we feed our remains to the vultures.' And, that is why we give it like that.

This is, of course, an ancient custom. And, all ancient mountain dwelling people used to leave their, uh, this thing, dead on top of hills. And, from that has become this. So, when they said, 'We build this thing, and we need to feed our bodies to some sort of, uh, animal.' So, they thought, 'We'll build a moat around here. And, we will put crocodiles in the moat to eat up the dead bodies.' Now, you know, if you read *The Crow Eaters*, and then you hear this, you would laugh, because it's such an absurd idea. First of all, where would we get the dead bodies?

And, you see, this man, this rancher, who said I would give my ranch, he said, 'You'll have to build a tower of silence exactly as specified by your religion.' So, where will we build it? How can you have a body here without it being mummified. What do they do to it, isn't it? They put all sorts of preservatives in it, you know, and then they burn it, they cremate it. You are not allowed to just leave a body to be eaten out here in America. So, it's an absurd idea, but you know, these are how little minorities come and think and do things here. Now, you have more than enough of the Parsee community, and Pakistan, and the partition.

MV: Yeah, thank you. [laughs]

BS: Thank you.

MV: Thank you so much.

BS: Okay, I've, I've, I've definitely outspoken Jalalo, Jalilo, whoever that was.

MV: Definitely.

BS: Yeah.

[The recorder is turned off, the interview ends]