

This Being Human
Episode 2 Transcript: Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

My name is Abdul-Rehman Malik and I'm canvassing the world for the most interesting people, to hear about their journeys, their work, and what it means to be alive in the world today. And perhaps nobody has captured that experience, of being alive, better than the 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi in his poem, "The Guest House."

FEMALE VOICE:

This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

So welcome to *This Being Human*, a podcast inspired by Rumi's words and motivated by all those who carry that message forward in the world today.

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

This being human to me is to amplify the voices of all those guides that have come on to Earth to tell stories.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy is a troublemaker. Her words, not mine. For more than two decades, the director and filmmaker has turned her lens on an issue society often turns away from: violence against women, and the impunity of its perpetrators. Her films are unflinching and unapologetic, putting women's issues on the global agenda and winning accolades at the same time, including two Oscars and seven Emmys. I spoke to Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy from her home in Karachi, Pakistan about the heartbreak she has borne witness to, and the hope and progress that she sees in the stories she tells.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK

Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, it's a pleasure to have you on *This Being Human*.

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

Thank you for having me.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK

Sharmeen, before the Oscars and the Emmys and the international acclaim, tell us something about the young Sharmeen. What did you see as a young girl that drew you to the work that you do now?

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

I was born and raised in Karachi, Pakistan and my earliest memories are of me always questioning things around me. I remember when I was 10 years old, I was going to school and the car had stopped at a traffic light. And I remember looking out of the window and seeing a young girl the same age as me. And her hand was stretched out and her nose was pressed against the window and she was begging. And I thought to myself, why is this young girl not in school? Why am I going to school and she is begging on the streets? And so I always questioned everything I saw around me. But I grew up in a family and in a society where asking questions — you know, when children ask questions, they were always sort of told to go off and

play or not to question the authority. But I think that when I was about 14, my mother, who was raising six children, was fed up with my questions and said to me that I should put my questions out to someone else. And she said that I should begin writing for English language newspapers in Pakistan. And she was the reason that I really began to explore the questions I had and putting them out not just to my family and my close network, but out to everyone in my country.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK

You went undercover as a journalist, didn't you, for a story at an English language newspaper in Pakistan when you were still a teenager? What was that story and why did you want to kind of dig into it?

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

I pitched an investigative story where I would go undercover to investigate the families that were allowing their children, namely their sons, to carry ammunition and to be part of an extreme bullying tradition that had started where they would literally kidnap other boys of their age, shave their head, you know, terrorize them, barge into parties with guns, start firing in the air. This was a culture that had just started coming into my city, and I wanted to expose these people and name and shame these families. And so I went undercover and you know I wrote this story. And on the morning that the story came out, it was the Muslim holiday of Eid and everything was shut. And my father had gone to say his prayers. And, you know, about five minutes into him leaving the house, the front door opened and he was bellowing out my name. And I was always getting into trouble, so my mother looked at me and said, "I don't know what you've done, but you better go and sort it." And I didn't know what I had done either. But the young boys that I'd written about had found out that their name was appearing in the morning in the newspaper on the front page of the magazine. And they had taken my name and my family's name and spray painted it with unspeakable profanities on our front gate, on our boundary wall, around our neighbourhood. Because one way to silence someone in my part of the world is to shame them. And they thought that by doing so, by writing profanity, by shaming and naming my family and saying things about me, that my father would forbid me from writing. But my father said something to me that has always stayed with me — of course, after giving me a shunting — which was that if you speak the truth, I will stand with you and so will the world. And then he got a group of people together and they white-washed the walls. And I knew right there and then that someone would always have my back. That speaking the truth was never going to be easy, but it was important to do so.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK

It sounds like you were the activist in the family, the one who was pushing, prodding, making other people uncomfortable. But you had another challenge with your dad, didn't you, when you decided to study abroad? And I'd love for you to tell us about the tactics, the game plan of how you persuaded your father to send you abroad.

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

You know, I came from a fairly conservative family where my father wanted us to get an education, but he didn't want us to go too far. And I really wanted to go to the United States. I wanted to get a solid education. I wanted to expose myself to competing worldviews and open up my mind to a different world. And I — the one way I thought I would do that was I would go to America for an undergraduate degree. And so my mother secretly allowed me to apply. And I applied to a number of all-women's colleges, and I got into all of them and I chose Smith. And when I told my father that I'd gotten in and I wanted to go, he just looked at me and said, "Congratulations, but you're not going." But I was determined. And so I went on a hunger strike and I said, "I will not eat until you let me go." And never underestimate the power of a daughter's

tears on her father. And, you know, about 24 hours later, I was given the permission to go off to America to get my undergraduate degree.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK

That's an incredible story. It's almost like the two things that that a true Desi parent can't take: a daughter's tears and their kids not having *khana*, that their kid's not having food.

You get to Smith and you're exploring storytelling. What makes you choose to pick up the camera as the means of storytelling?

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

So I was doing a lot of print writing. I was writing all through college. I was freelancing for different newspapers. And then, when I was a senior at Smith College, 9/11 happened. And I began thinking about all of the journalists that were parachuting into my part of the world, writing as outsiders, and I had a unique opportunity to tell the stories of my people, my part of the world, because I was straddling two worlds. And I understood two worlds. And so I thought about doing something visual because I didn't think that the words I was writing were resonating with the audiences that were unfamiliar with my part of the world. And so I began to think about what visual journalism would look like. And I literally one day typed into a search bar "visual journalism," and the word "documentary" popped up. And I thought to myself, "That's what I want to do. I want to become a documentary filmmaker." So I binge-watched as many documentary films as I possibly could in my college dorm room. And then I went home in December 2001 with an idea that I wanted to create a film. And the first thing that hit me was the sheer number of Afghan refugee children that had flooded the streets of Karachi because the war had begun in Afghanistan and parents were sending their children to safety. And as I began to look at the coverage of the war, the thing that was missing was the voices of the youngest victims of war, the refugee children. And so I interviewed a lot of them and I took their photographs. I didn't know how to operate a camera, and so I just did audio recordings and I took photographs.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Sharmeen's lack of experience with a camera didn't dissuade her. After coming back to the United States, she wrote a proposal that she sent to 80 American organizations, asking them to fund her to go back to Pakistan to make a film. She was only 21 at the time, and full of hope that her proposal would be met with success. When the rejections started to pile up, she turned her attention a little closer to home, to her own Smith College, asking if they would back her instead. They agreed. And with their support, she took it a step further.

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

And right about that time, after I had secured that funding, I wrote to the president of *New York Times* television and *New York Times* had set up a television unit. And I sent an email, an unsolicited email, and I got a response saying that, "Send me a proposal." And I did. And then I got a response to that email 15 minutes later saying, "Can you come to New York?" So I bought my first suit and I got on an Amtrak train and I walked into *The New York Times* and I pitched to a number of the people in the editorial board and *The New York Times* funded and trained me. And that's how my career in filmmaking began.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Since then, Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy had made her career telling the stories of women and girls. Their trials, tribulations, and triumphs. And they're not easy stories to tell.

FILM CLIP:

Honour killing under Pakistani law should be treated as a murder. And the case should be prosecuted in the court of law as any murder case.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Her 2015 documentary *The Girl in the River* told the story of a 19-year-old named Saba, who survived getting shot by her uncle and father, and the pressure she was under to forgive them so that they wouldn't face jail time. Her 2012 film *Saving Face* told the stories of the women who survived acid attacks, and their quest to get reconstructive surgeries to help rebuild their lives. The films are impossible to watch without feeling angry. And that's exactly what Sharmeen wants.

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

Anger has driven my work. I say I have a barometer of anger, and I choose my topics based on that barometer. I think it's very important to hold up a mirror to society and to search for the truth. And in the kind of societies we live in, it is extremely hard to be a truth teller. And I often say that I'm not here to win a popularity contest. I'm not here to be loved. I'm here to be free. I'm here to speak the truth so that we bear witness to what is happening, so that no one else has to go through that again.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

There's been a cost to Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy for being the one holding up that mirror to society.

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

I have received threats. I have been on the receiving end of vicious campaigns. People would much rather hide things under the carpet than address them. And I'm reminded of my grandfather, whose stories I grew up listening. And my family migrated from India into Pakistan with a notion that they were going to create a country that was equitable for men and women, that respected minorities, that was free and open. And all of the sacrifices they made were for that vision, that society. But that is not the country that I opened up my eyes in. That is not the country I grew up in. And that is not what I saw around me. And so I was always propelled to seek that country that my grandparents had set out to found. And so whenever there is blowback, I am always reminded and why it's important to fight for that vision.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Was it difficult to find that vision as you explored and dug into these stories?

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

Yes, it is extremely difficult to hold up that mirror to society and to find that Pakistan that the founders wanted to create. But that doesn't mean it doesn't exist. It exists in pockets across the country where my work has taken me, to small towns and villages, to cities where far from the glare of the headlines and the razzamatazz, there are men and women committed to creating change, where they're risking their lives every single day so that there could be education and healthcare and the children around them could be free of abuse. And those are the stories, those are the ordinary men and women that give me hope that there is a better tomorrow coming and this fight is worth fighting.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

When you explore issues, as you say, that are often swept under the rug, papered over, like violence against women, how did you contend with the reluctance of women to come forward and share their stories as much as you wanted to bear witness to what was happening?

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

None of the women I have ever met have been reluctant to tell their stories. These women are braver than any women I have met.

[film sounds — girl speaking]

The young girl who I was interviewing, she was the one directing me, as opposed to me directing her. She was telling me who I should speak to, where I should go, what I should do. And she made a very poignant note very early on that makes sure my storytelling reaches everybody, because “I don’t want what has happened to me to happen to any other woman.” And they want to tell their stories because they are so convinced that by telling their stories, they will be able to create some sort of change. And they have. People don’t look at issues differently because of me. They look at issues differently because these women have been brave enough to tell their stories.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Another one of your films, Sharmeen, *The Peacekeepers*, is this intimate chronicle of a group of group of Bengali Muslim women who go on a yearlong peacekeeping mission in Haiti. And despite the pressure of their husbands and children, and lack of training and the risk of being in a politically fraught position, they go into this incredibly difficult country, in this incredibly difficult scenario. What drew you to those women?

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

The Bangladeshi women that we filmed were the world’s first all-woman, all-Muslim peacekeeping unit. And we wanted to show that Muslim women are not just victims.

[film sounds: singing and clapping]

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

They are survivors, fighters, policewomen, lawyers. They are women who can take charge, and if society allows them, they can actually lead from the front. And that’s what *Peacekeepers* is about. It’s about a group of women who choose to leave their families to lead from the front.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

It’s such a powerful film, and I think what’s really particularly moving about it is the intimate eye that you as a filmmaker take to their journey. And I wonder how challenging it was to film that year-long journey, which takes us from the intimacy of their homes and families in Bangladesh to their training and then to the streets of Haiti, where they’re on duty. It felt like this was remarkable access that you had to them. And I wonder how challenging that was to get that kind of access and that closeness.

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

In the women, we found humility. We found an eagerness to tell their stories. We also found that it’s not always easy to leave your family and your husband and go off halfway across the world to serve your country. And these women allowed us access into their homes, into their inner sanctums. Gave us access to the children, gave us access to their husbands and to their lives, both in Bangladesh while they were away, and in Haiti.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

They placed an incredible degree of trust in you, Sharmeen.

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

I think the trust comes from embracing people. You have to put yourself in the shoes of the people you make films about. You have to allow them to trust you and you have to trust them. In my more than two decades of filmmaking, I have found that if you gain trust, people tell you things that they have never told anyone — sometimes things they've never even admitted to themselves. And that's the power of storytelling.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

The subjects of your film, the women and men whose stories you chronicle — tell us about the times when they've seen the finished work for the first time.

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

When we screened *Saving Face*, which is a film about acid violence, to Zakia, who had been fighting to send her husband who had thrown acid on her face to jail, she could not stop crying. Because she saw in our film the struggle of her life and her successes. And she left the screening holding her head up high and saying that it had made her feel stronger and more empowered.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

I wondered if Sharmeen had ever felt conflicted about the stories she told, if she wondered about their real impact, or if they're veering into voyeurism. I wanted to know about some of the tough questions she's asked herself about her work.

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

A few years ago, I began to think about the films I was making. *Who is watching these films? Why am I creating these films?* And I began to think about dissemination. It's not just important to create films. It's important to make sure that you disseminate them so that people across the world, in communities where they need to watch it the most, have access to it. And so in Pakistan, I built the country's first mobile cinema that travels from village to village, town to town, screening films. Not just my own, but other filmmakers as well. Taking films into communities who would never have access to them to offer a competing worldview to them, to chose them, to make them think about the world as a different place, to force them to ask questions not just about themselves, but about their society, their country, their leadership. And we've been doing this for the last four years now, travelling to over 400 locations across the country. Sometimes in areas which have no electricity, no power, where children have never seen television. And setting up a mobile cinema the rolls and stops. And as the sun sets, it lights up in the night sky with films that children should watch, and adults should watch, and men should watch, and women should watch. And in many communities, we have been stopped because we introduce ideas that people are uncomfortable with, but after negotiations and lengthy conversations, we're allowed in. And in many other communities we are welcomed again and again and again.

DR. ULRIKE AL-KHAMIS

Hello, I am Dr. Ulrike Al-Khamis, interim director and CEO of the Aga Khan Museum. If you are enjoying our *This Being Human* podcast, why not visit our website at Agakhanmuseum.org? Here you will find a treasure trove of digital collections and online resources related to the arts and achievements of the Muslim world. From historical artifacts and thought-provoking exhibitions, to a wide range of educational materials and contemporary living arts performances.

All of this is made possible from the vision and dedication of Prince Ayn Aga Khan and his Highness The Aga Khan himself to encourage an appreciation of the cultural threads that bind us all together. Again, our website is agakhanmuseum.org. And now, back to *This Being Human*.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

When you talked about your origin journey and beginning on this road of telling stories through film, a lot of it was around seeing poor coverage of Pakistan. And yet, you know, there's been kind of this pushback on some of your work by those who say that it, that using terms like honour killing, you know, increases or furthers harmful stereotypes of Islam and Muslims, that airing this dirty laundry, quote-unquote, showcases the countries and regions you depict in a bad light. It confirms prejudices and in the various stereotypes that you might be willing to challenge. How do you confront that? What do you say to that?

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINOY:

Well, I'm a social-justice documentary filmmaker. I'm not Pakistan's PR agent. And social - justice documentary filmmakers shed light in areas where they're meant to be. I create films to start difficult conversations and to push legislations. If I did not have international pressure, if my films did not create noise, I would not have been able to impact legislation in my country. I would not have been taken seriously and many of the issues that I have brought to the forefront would not have been tackled in the manner that they have been tackled. It is precisely because I have a global voice, it is precisely because I shame people into thinking about how they are allowing these things to happen on their watch, that things have moved, that the needle has moved. And I am not apologetic at all about those tactics.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You know that that burden of representation, as you say, as much as you reject it, often it's placed on us, isn't it? Especially in the time that we've lived in. And in a way, you know, I think it is there's a constant balancing act, isn't there, about this notion. And often it comes from our own communities, but often it comes from others, doesn't it? That all of a sudden, they want to place, as you said, you know, Pakistan and its representation on your shoulders. How do you how do you deal with that? How do you kind of push back against that?

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINOY:

I'm a Pakistani. I was born and raised in this country. I choose to make this country my home. I could live anywhere in the world. When I travel overseas and represent Pakistan, when people see me, they see the way I speak, they see the way I carry myself, they know that Pakistan is a country that does allow women to stand up and speak. But at the same time, it has women like Saba, who is a victim of honour killing, and a woman like Zakia, who's a victim of acid violence. So they see two different faces of Pakistan. I represent what Pakistan could be if it invested in its women, and they represent what Pakistan is because it chooses to oppress its women.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

I mean, that's so powerful, Sharmeen, because in a way one of the things that you reveal through your films is the courage and the antidote that comes from within. And I'm thinking of someone like Dr. Mohammad Jawad, the doctor whose team we meet in *Saving Face*, who performs reconstructive surgeries for women whose faces have been marred by by acid attacks, for instance.

FILM CLIP:

My name is Mohammad Jawwal. I'm originally from Pakistan. I was born and raised in Karachi. I'm a consultant plastic surgeon. I do wonderful body contouring and lipo-shaping, tummy tuck, et cetera. I do a lot of facial work. So when I heard about the acid violence in my homeland, I said, "Bingo, I must do something." And when I saw that there's so many of them, I had to go back.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

There's also the pro bono lawyers who helped Saba in *The Girl in the River*. Tell me about the hope that you see coming within your communities.

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

The hope that I see is from the Internet, where young women are now speaking out more than ever about their rights and where they see themselves in society. The hope I see is in communities where women who are illiterate are brave enough to speak up and say that we don't want what has happened to us to happen to the next generation of young girls. And because society is changing, there will always be a push-and-pull factor. But I think that the way to look at it is that in this push-and-pull factor, women are refusing to be put down.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

That's the Pakistan that you want people to think about, this Pakistan of resistance, this Pakistan fighting for freedom, isn't it?

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

This is the Pakistan that I live in. This is the Pakistan I see every single day. There are women who are saying, it is enough. This is not my mother's generation. This is not even my generation. The next generation of young women in this country are not going to be the same that we have seen. They are going to shape their own destiny. And it's not going to be easy, but they're determined to do so.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Against this backdrop of hardship and controversy, Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy has found blockbuster international success.

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

In 2012, when we were nominated for an Academy Award, I didn't even know that you could get nominated for a documentary film. It really did come out of the blue for us. And it's been an incredible journey to win the Academy Awards. And it's been incredible because it has allowed me to amplify my own voice. And because I've been able to amplify my own voice, all of the people who I make films about, their voice now reaches millions. Their message now reaches millions. And what they're saying, the people in the highest echelons of power sit up and listen. That's what the accolades have done.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

So you win the Academy Award in 2012. Then again in 2016, you get an Oscar for *A Girl in the River*. There are very few people who've won two Academy Awards, so it would be remiss of me not to ask you what happens to you when you win it a second time.

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

Well, you try and win it the third time.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

I love it.

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

I mean, you know, there are there — I think it's important to continue to tell the stories you want to tell. And if the craft is celebrated, if the stories that you're telling resonate with people, then there's no greater reward for a filmmaker.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Where do you keep your Oscars and your Emmys?

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

I keep my Oscars on a mantelpiece in my living room with my children's tennis trophies and sports day medals and the shields my dogs have won at the dog show.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

So they're in very good company.

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

They're in excellent company.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Like you said, you know, winning these awards and being able to speak to ever more people and to get heard has meant that you've caught the attention of the highest offices in many countries, but in Pakistan. And in 2016, you're invited by then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to screen your film at his residence. What was it like being in those institutions of power and being celebrated and feted, sometimes by individuals who themselves or the institutions they represent are a roadblock to addressing the things that you are passionate about?

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

In my 20s, I was a rebel. I didn't want to work with the government, but I quickly realized in my 30s that to create large-scale change, you need to bring the institutions of power on to your side. If you're alone, you can only create so much change. But if you have the institutions behind you, you can create monumental change. And so it was important to have the prime minister of Pakistan view *A Girl in the River* and say that there is no honour in honour killing and be on the frontlines of creating change so that institutions would realize that the government is serious about ensuring that no more women are killed in the name of honour. So while there are people who think that this work should not be done, that it brings shame to the country, I am proud to say that there are people who do push and champion my work as well.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

What is this being human to you, Sharmeen?

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

This being human to me is to amplify the voices of all those guides that have come on to Earth to tell stories.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, thank you. It's just been such a pleasure and honour speaking to you on *This Being Human*.

SHARMEEN OBAID-CHINYOY:

Thank you.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER

This Being Human is an Antica Production. Our senior producer is Pacinthe Mattar. Production and sound design by Mitch Stuart. Production assistance by Sydney Bradshaw. Original music by Boombox Sound. The executive producers are Kathleen Goldhar and Lisa Gabriele. And Stuart Coxe is the president of Antica Productions.

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