

SHAHZAD HAFEEZ – BOLLYWOOD SALON

ELMHURST (QUEENS), NEW YORK
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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INTERVIEWEE: SHAHZAD HAFEEZ
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CT: We are here at Bollywood Salon in Queens in the Elmhurst, New York on Broadway Avenue. It is August 8th and it's 1:50pm. I am here with Shahzad Hafeez. Can you state your full name and the number of years you've been doing hair?

SH: Shahzad Hafeez, my name, and I went to beauty school in '90 so I guess twenty-two years I'm doing hair now.

CT: Talk about where you're from and all the places that you've lived.

SH: I come from Pakistan and I was born and mostly raised there and I lived in Utah my first four, five years in the US.

CT: Where in Utah?

SH: Logan, Utah.

CT: Is that near Salt Lake?

SH: Near Salt Lake about ninety miles west of Salt Lake City. I went to school over there.

CT: So was that a culture shock?

SH: Very much so. In fact when I was on the plane from New York to Logan, Utah, somebody asked me, "Do you know where you're going?" I said, "I know I'm going to the University in Logan, Utah." But I had no idea, for me, America was all one big country. So yeah, Logan, Utah was a very beautiful small town by

the canyon but I had no idea about the Mormons and it was predominately a Mormon state.

CT: Why were you there?

SH: I had a friend who was going to school there and he was the one who sort of motivated me, initiated me to go to University over there because he really liked it and he said the school was good so I just kind of followed him.

CT: And how old were you?

SH: I was in my late teens early 20s.

CT: Were you “out” as a Muslim? Did you practice as a Muslim?

SH: Yes, I grew up, I was born as a Muslim and I’m still a Muslim.

CT: Did you feel free...in terms of the Mormon culture there, did you feel like it was an issue at all?

SH: Personally, frankly speaking, I never felt that. Of course a few times when I was estaying in the dormitory some of the Mormons would come in and invite you to visit the temple or just [tell you] about the Mormon religion itself. But I never found them offensive. It was kind of like an introduction. To me it was perfectly fine. It was like getting to know the culture. I stayed in Logan, Utah and attended the university there, Utah State University. I graduated from there in 1983.

CT: What did you study?

SH: Mechanical Engineering.

CT: So how did you become a hairdresser?

SH: It was by accident. It was never a part of the plan. Even though I grew up liking every aspect of beauty or design, or color. I was very art inclined. I studied engineering because we had a family business back home in Pakistan, it was a manufacturing set up we had and me being the elder of the boys I was initiated or motivated to study engineering so I could be part of the set up.

CT: Where did you go after Utah?

SH: After Utah, I went to a town called Rolla, Missouri. It was about 80 miles from St. Louis. It was a small engineering-oriented university. University of Missouri at Rolla and I did my Master’s over there in Engineering Management. Soon after I graduated from Utah, I went home for a year and then after a year, I was in Missouri. I graduated with my Master’s in ’86, ’87.

CT: Did you stay in Missouri?

SH: No, I moved back home, and I stayed in my country until about 1990. I was helping with the family business, the manufacturing set up we had, the industry we had. Also in between I worked for a bank for a year so I had another job in an engineering firm and then in 1990, I came back into the United States. First I was in Arizona, I was staying with my brother in Phoenix, Arizona. A friend of mine invited me to New York. I must say I was very, very frightened to come to New York. I said, “No, I don’t think I want to be in New York.”

CT: Was this in the ‘90s?

SH: It was 1990. I pretty much had no idea about New York at all so I took up the offer and I came to New York to see my friends who lived in Brooklyn. I stayed with them for...I guess I was only supposed to stay for two weeks and now I guess it’s [been] twenty-two years off and on in New York.

CT: So what was that experience like? Were you in an area that had more Pakistani culture? What was the neighborhood like?

SH: It was an Italian neighborhood — Carroll Gardens I didn’t see any Pakistani’s there. I think the Pakistani’s were further up, maybe like Coney Island. There was quite a Pakistani neighborhood in Coney Island. But I wasn’t so motivated or interested to venture out to Coney Island. I think I was part of the Americana. It was not conscious or unconscious. It was just natural to be there the time I was there. So I enjoyed living in Carroll Gardens, it was a beautiful neighborhood and I believe it’s still a nice neighborhood. There were nice pastry shops. And I was going to beauty school. In 1990, that’s when I decided to go to beauty school.

CT: Did you ever work in the engineering field?

SH: Yes, I did.

CT: Did you not like it?

SH: I liked it. It was fine. It’s just that when I was in New York in 1990, I was looking for work in engineering and I was having a hard time, there was some sort of recession going on and my friend who I was staying with suggested....I said, “I’ve always been interested in beauty and I’ve always looked at women’s fashion magazines and he said, “Well why don’t you develop another skill? Look for work in engineering...” I checked into it and it was quite a decision though because I know once I set myself to something then I’ve got to finish it. So I looked into it and of course I called up my brother, my family and said that I want to study, to go to beauty school, they were of course extremely surprised. [they said] “Why would you want to do that? After studying so much you just want to become a barber or somebody who cuts hair for a living?” They didn’t really understand that. Anyway I went ahead and joined the Wilfred Academy in Manhattan. It was a beauty academy and a year later, the end of 1990, early 1991 I finished my cosmetology school and [received] my license. And from that day on to this day, I’ve been doing hair.

CT: Have you had any regrets?

SH: Well I often wonder in my destiny, what was the engineering for? But I guess maybe I'm a better person, the fact that I went to engineering school. Because everything I believe in [a] sense, you're not a victim of anything. It's a place where you wanted to be so I think that engineering definitely makes me a better person. Maybe if I wouldn't have gone to engineering school, there would have been something missing in my life so I think somehow it fits into the picture.

CT: Had you ever done hair before?

SH: Yes, I used to cut my friend's hair. I grew up playing with dolls. I would do their hair. I used to also do my mom's hair and my sister's hair. I guess if it was not the industry, the manufacturing industry with the family, I would have gone to an art school because naturally I was more inclined towards arts than mathematics or science. But hard work made me learn that too.

CT: You kind of found your calling.

SH: Yeah.

CT: I know you went to school at the ...

SH: Wilfred Academy.

CT: And then you went to Bumble and bumble.

SH: Yeah right.

CT: So you went to Wilfred and graduated. Did you start working after that? When did you go to Bumble and bumble?

SH: Well at Wilfred Academy...different salons would come and interview people to take people on an apprenticeship. So I was interviewed by Bumble and bumble while I was at Wilfred Academy. There were two people selected from my class and I was one of them. I was really thrilled in 1991 to be picked up by Bumble and bumble because it was such a huge salon and they had so much success and all that. So as soon as I finished Wilfred Academy, I went to Bumble and bumble, in between I did join another salon for a short period, but Bumble and bumble was my really my first job in NY.

CT: And what year was that?

SH: I would say 1991.

CT: Was Bumble and bumble an actual academy or a salon?

SH: It was an actual salon. You joined it as an assistant. As you assist, you trained also. There were five days of work, six days of work and then you have a training

class as your reward as working as an assistant and you do get paid also as an assistant.

CT: So how was that different because then you went to Vidal Sassoon?

SH: Right.

CT: After Bumble and bumble?

SH: After Bumble and bumble. Actually I stayed at Bumble and bumble a year and a month or something and then I quit Bumble and bumble and I joined Vidal Sassoon.

CT: Why did you quit?

SH: At that time, I wasn't too happy with the cutting program at Bumble and bumble. I didn't find it very structured. It was very kind of free...and I felt that I needed more structure so I could see exactly where I was. I checked into Vidal Sassoon. And Vidal Sassoon had a wonderful program for their trainees. So I went in for an interview, there were about thirty people for an interview to join in as an assistant. Again, I was selected among two or three people. And I started my apprenticeship, I guess a week later at Vidal Sassoon and I must say that I was extremely satisfied and happy with the way my training went at Vidal Sassoon.

CT: Out of all the schools?

SH: Out of all the schools I went to. It was basically a salon training. I didn't go to the Academy, I was part of the salon and you finish your training with the salon and you become a hairdresser or a colorist. It's much more intense and much more strict because when you finish training you start working in that salon. If you're fresh from beauty school it takes about two to three years to become a stylist or colorist at [Vidal] Sassoon.

CT: And you make how much?

SH: You make minimum wage while you're apprenticing as an assistant in the salon and that's the price you have to pay. It's tough. It's very tough because you don't make much money at all.

CT: Well the idea is that once you graduate and become a stylist and you become a stylist there right? Or the fact that you're trained by Vidal Sassoon, does that mean if you go to other salons that you get a higher...

SH: Well, if there is an opening at the location you're training then you are hired there but if you finish your training and there is not an opening at that time they will send you to another location, in the city or in the nation.

CT: And then what would you make, roughly?

SH: At that point, I'm talking like '93 when I was at Vidal Sassoon, I think at that point, once you graduate in the salon as a hair colorist or a hair stylist. I would say you would start off at thirty something [thousand a year] and then it depends on your capabilities [and] how soon you'd make your clientele and then it's all up to you. They do give you a base salary as a hairdresser every week and then your commission.

CT: So how did you get to Bollywood Salon?

SH: I'm afraid it was unfortunate that I couldn't really complete my program at Vidal Sassoon, after staying there like a year and two months or something, I had to move back to Pakistan because of [a] family emergency and I ended up staying in Pakistan from '93, '94 to 2000, a period of approximately five to six years. Back home I worked out of my house. I was helping my dad also because the industry unfortunately was winding up and my dad wanted my help. So I felt that while I was in Pakistan [phone ringing several times so he went to answer it, we discuss the possibility of turning the ringer off but he said he didn't want the owner to "scream at me" So we left it on].

So I felt that I worked really well with Southeast Asian hair because I was practicing that in Pakistan, the years I was there and I could be useful and I could really have fun with it. So I thought maybe I should find a place that attracts all the Southeast Asians and I can do their hair because I also developed a palate for make-up, for hair and make-up, especially for bridal [Indian] ceremonies. So I wanted to do that as well which I found that I might not have enough exposure at Damian West regarding the Southeast Asian market. I wanted to do the Southeast Asian market also, so I opted to work part-time at Damian West and that search led me to visit Jackson Heights. I came to Jackson Heights and looked at the local salons that were there and I met the owner of the Bollywood Salon. He was also working at one of the salons. Back then it was called Bombay Salon. So I talked to the owner and the owner was thrilled because of my training and my previous exposure, he was thrilled to have me on board. So I joined Bombay Salon part-time, two or three days a week, especially on the weekends, where I could do some wedding work, because most of the weddings concentrated on the weekends. And if I was not doing a wedding then I would just do hair work. At that point we didn't have much women cutting their hair in that salon. It was more for eyebrow threading and waxing and a lot more barbering was going on, generally men would come in and get their hair cut. So I started off, I would introduce myself to women who were there to have their eyebrows threaded and I would let them know of my expertise they would eventually sit in my chair and I would cut their hair.

CT: And what year was this?

SH: This was I guess 2000, 2001.

CT: So the threading has been happening for...

SH: I think even before, yeah.

CT: So now it's really trendy? What happened?

SH: It's really picked up. Back then I don't think there were many salons in Manhattan doing threading and now I guess it's really common and threading has become an established means of doing the eyebrows and removing hair from the face area. It has really picked up and there are salons basically just doing threading only.

CT: Talk a little bit about Indian hair and how it is different structurally than European hair or African hair. Do you know about the anatomical structure of Indian hair?

SH: I think the inner structure is the same, it's just the quantity might be more and the way the cuticle lies on Indian hair, that might be different and maybe that has a lot to do with the way the weather is, the way it's formed. Indian hair can be anywhere from very curly to straight. More than hair it's about determining what is the standard of beautiful hair. I think hair is just a medium and it might be common in every race. But I think most important is how did they conceive it [to be] beautiful? So if you're from a certain culture, every culture has its beauty icon and other aspects of it, maybe color, maybe the way it falls, the way it falls around the face, the length or the whatever, so that you have to be really familiar with and once you're familiar with that then you can play with the hair, which is a medium to make it go in that direction and then the most important is to be able to understand what the client wants as in for their hair and that has a lot to do with what they grew up with looking or finding beautiful. And that could be style, that could be actresses, or that could be just the folklore of that [culture].

CT: Do you find that your clients want...you know say in Manhattan, Jennifer Aniston's haircut was really popular say 15 years ago and everybody wanted that. Do you find that your clients want more American celebrity hairstyles or more Bollywood?

SH: I think Bollywood...a lot of the fashion among Southeast Asian clientele comes from Bollywood. And I think Bollywood is also very, very influenced by Hollywood. So Jennifer Aniston's hair, it was a worldwide phenomenon and everybody wanted Jennifer Aniston's hair *but* maybe how that would transform into their hair and their look.

CT: Even in Indian culture?

SH: I think I've done Jennifer Aniston's version of hair as long as I can remember. It was such a huge phenomenon, the way it fell the way the layering fell around the face and the shoulders. I did millions of versions of that hair *but* an Indian version of that.

CT: So how do you do that? What are the challenges? If you were doing a European woman's hair, what changes would you have to implement to make that work on Indian hair?

SH: I think Jennifer Aniston being a European or American or whatever, the hair texture, I mean to say, that hair [style] was created on that hair, on that medium. So Indian hair is very different from somebody like Jennifer Aniston's hair, so as a hairstylist you've got to bring that, transform that look with a medium which is different from one that was created on but somehow make it look...maybe not like that, or maybe inspired by that?

CT: So what is the biggest challenge? I'm assuming that Indian hair is heavier?

SH: Definitely heavier. It falls different. And somehow the cut has to work for the features also. Indian features are very different from...Southeast Asian features are different from other people or other populations. So it has to somehow complement that. At the end of the day the hairstyle has to complement the person's face or their personality.

CT: How are their features different?

SH: I would say every race has its own specialty. I wouldn't say different, different, it's just another variation of human form but very similar within the...

CT: It seems like in Southeast Asian culture, especially with make-up, the eyes are very important.

SH: Yes, I think you're right. The eyes have...I guess the way the whole race has evolved the eyes are a bit more almond shaped they're not as deeper set and the shape is a combination of a few races, a few kinds of people who've traveled to India. And I believe back in the day there are so many kinds of people who travel to India from Alexander's army to the Arab traders to the Turks to the Europeans to the Africans to everyone and I think that India there is a huge spectrum of different looks right from the fairest yellow-toned skin, or the cooler/warmer tone skin to the darker tone. So we have everything in India in terms of the skin tone.

CT: How curly does the hair get?

SH: I think generally speaking, I would say India, because I personally feel that we are the Indian race whether we are in Pakistan or Bangladesh we are basically the Indian race from that subcontinent. South Indian's tend to have curlier hair. Northern Indians have a mix of straight...then again, it's the influence of all the people who have passed through that region. North Indians I would say are the most mixed Indians. So there's a variety of hair, there's straight hair, there's curly hair, there's wavy hair, but generally North Indians tend to have wavy, wavy/straight and South Indians generally have curly, coarse thick hair.

CT: So is there a preferred texture?

SH: As a hairdresser, I always motivate my clients to see the beauty in what they have. Because I personally believe there's beauty in all kinds of texture, of looks and everything. I don't generally like to work...let's say the client has curly hair I will try to give her a hairstyle that will complement her own texture, may be curly or straight so that it can look beautiful in its own natural form. That is my aim.

CT: I agree as well but do you find culturally, is there a preference?

SH: I guess I have generally seen that since Indian clothes have embellishments and are very colorful and a lot of work...hair that does not have so much movement, that's there but does not have a strong presence kind of works well with the whole ensemble and kind of complements better.

CT: So is it sprayed? Is that how it doesn't move?

SH: Most of the time I see they get it blow dried straight. If they have curlier hair they prefer to have it blow-dried straight if they're going out or wearing evening wear. Because maybe they don't want the hair to have such a strong shape because the clothes have such presence and maybe they want to show the clothes or whatever. But there is a general tendency of getting the hair styled or straightened especially when they're wearing an evening look or wearing party clothes or something like that.

[A woman came into the salon and another associate was talking to her. She was there to get her eyebrows threaded]

CT: Can you think of other celebrities that were influential to hairstyles, either of Indian culture or American culture?

SH: I think Hollywood celebrities, women or European celebrities, their hair and make-up has always been popular in the Indian film industry, which is Bollywood. Because of the media, now we can see exactly what trend or what's happening in anywhere in the world. [Voices in the background getting louder] But back in the '60s or the '70s or the early '80s when [internet] media was not really there, one wasn't really aware of what was going on in the Bollywood film industry. In any country most of the time, fashion is led by popular actresses at that time. So of course in the '60s or '70s or '80s whoever were the popular actresses in India at that time in Bollywood the hair trends were followed by the common people. And at that time it was big hair, just like in the West, it was this big coiffed hair. And it was tough to do that because it was a lot of hair to handle and to make into the styles like the beehives or Audrey Hepburn's hair in Breakfast at Tiffany's but of course very much practiced in the Indian film industry. People may not be aware but all of these styles were very, very popular in India also. And even now, of course going back to your prior question, "Would they choose to have straighter hair?" I think if you look at all the popular actresses of Bollywood as of right now, I think maybe one has curly hair, they are always shown with straight-styled hair so I guess hence the follow up, that [straight hair] becomes a fashion icon. There is only one actress that I remember in the last couple of years who came in and showed her curlier texture, Kangana (Ranaut), she starred in this movie and kept

her curly hair. She starred in a movie, the movie's name was Fashion and she was a big hit with her curly hair.

[The phone rings and more people come into the shop and we stop the interview because it's too busy in the salon. The woman who was there to get her face threaded allowed me to photograph her.]

[END]