

# THE GROWING UP YEARS!

**A LIFE LESS ORDINARY!**

ALY ZAKER

Dhaka was already getting crowded and there were a very few places where one could seek seclusion. So my visits to the outskirts of the town became frequent. During this time, while in town, I picked up friendship with some original Dhaka dwellers. These people, even today, are known as Dhakaiyas and are full of wit and humour.

For reasons best known to them the original residents of Ganderia called the locality 'Ganderia country'. I remember being herded into a group of people of all ages to be marched to the Dhaka stadium in support of the East End club in a soccer league match shouting the slogan 'Ganderia Country Zindabad' zealously. During this time, I made some acquaintances with the original Dhakaiyas. One of them was Wasek. He was a vegetable vendor in Sutrapur bazar. So was his father who was very affectionate towards me. Wasek used to sell vegetable in his father's shop in the mornings and his father in the afternoons. Wasek used to hit the Dhupkhola maidan to

play football with all of us. He was not much of a football player but there was no dearth of enthusiasm in him for the game. He was a great admirer of the East End Club and dreamt of playing for the team some day. Wasek was short and stocky. It never seemed like he would ever make it to a respectable football team. But for him there was no lack of enthusiasm. I made it a point to always buy fresh vegetables whenever I was asked to do this daily chore by Maa. Wasek had his inimitable way of hard selling his stuff. He called his carrots 'Nurjahan' after the name of the famous Pakistani crooner who was his favourite. If you asked him why this strange name? He would break the crispy carrot in the middle and say 'doesn't it sound like a note from her songs?' I became friendly with some other original Dhakaiyas during this time. Salahuddin was one of them.



Popularly known as 'Saula' he was a couple of years older than I and affectionately looked after me as my elder brother. He was a football player in demand for the 'B' division team of the East End club. Salahuddin tried to teach me a few tricks of soccer. There were a few others among the locals that I held in high esteem. Idris bhai the linkman of the East End Club soccer team was a wizard in his craft. He had to pitch against the mighty Kala Gafur from the Makran coast in West Pakistan to get a place in the then East Pakistan team which he did and won. Khaleq bhai was arguably the fastest sprinter in the province then. We used to hold our breath when he would dash down to the finishing line of the hundred-metre sprint, clad in his characteristic ultra-marine blue satin shorts and dark red vest.

One extraordinary expertise all

Dhakaiya women had in common was their skill in culinary art. They were particularly good in meat cooking. The mothers of my friends loved to feed me all kinds of Dhaka delicacies. Sutli kabab, made out of beef, which is still available in old town area of Dhaka or an occasional treat of Morog Polao, Nehari, Tehri or even beef or mutton curry used to taste like they were cooked in heaven and were just out of the world.

I was a thoroughbred Bangla medium student while in school with hardly any intellectual incentive from the school. Our favourite were children magazines like Shuktara or Shishu Shathi published by the Deb Sahitya Kutir of Calcutta and of course books like Thakur Maa'r Jhuli. It was not until later that I came across very apt translations of Jules Verne, Jonatan Swift, Walter Scot, Charles Dickens, Alexandre Dumas or Daniel Defoe.

*The author is an actor, director & writer. These are excerpts from Aly Zaker's upcoming biography, exclusively for the readers of Star Showbiz.*

## SNOW WHITE ALIAS

# RITA SHABNAM NEZAMI

**LIFE'S LYRICS**



NASHID KAMAL

Every year, on Christmas day, we celebrate another important event in Bangladesh. The world's first Bangla channel was inaugurated on that day in the year 1964. With that memory comes to my mind my playmates with whom I performed on BTV. Rita Shabnam Nezami's name tops the list. She first acted as the child character Sudha in Tagore's drama titled Dak Ghor and then as Tushar Konna in the children's drama Snow White. As we grew up together, we saw Rita taking part in dance, music (Esho Gaan Shikhi along with Shimul Yousuf) acting and then a very unique area-mime. I remember Rita miming a children's event of looking for pickles in the jar and finishing them off with satisfaction, much to the chagrin of her Mom!

In 1971, Rita left for London, her father Mr. Ruhul Amin Nezami was tortured by the Pakistani army during the liberation war. He was an eminent and progressive publisher and founded the Standard Publishers. Rita was surrounded by books when she grew up. It comes as no surprise that in later life, books filled up her world. She studied in Dhaka, London, Moscow, Barcelona, Paris and Dallas. She has lived and worked in four continents, currently as faculty in creative writing in the University of SUNY-Stony Brook, USA. For a few years Rita worked in Dhaka, working as a translation officer at the Bangladesh Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Speaking and translating from four languages, she has taught languages and



world literature for more than twenty years. Rita earned her Master's degree in Russian language and literature from Moscow State University. She taught Russian language and literature at the University of Dhaka, and French and ESL at the American International School in Dhaka. For fifteen years, Rita lived and taught in Paris, and translated from

French, Russian, and Bengali into English. Rita studied Spanish for a year in Barcelona and lived for three years in Tangier, Morocco, where she taught English and translated.

Taking a doctorate in literature and translation in 2007 from the University of Texas at Dallas, Rita translated for her dissertation a novel by Tahar Ben Jelloun, a

Goncourt Prize-winning writer twice nominated for the Nobel Prize. She went on to translate and publish short stories by Ben Jelloun in American and Irish anthologies. In 2005, the American Literary Translators Association (ALTA) awarded her a fellowship for her translation of the first chapter of Ben Jelloun's novel, The Public Scribe. She has been a featured reader at ALTA conferences since 2003.

The New Yorker published Rita S. Nezami's translation of a novella on the Arab Spring by Ben Jelloun in 2013, and Northwestern University Press published her book of translations By Fire: Writings on the Arab Spring with a substantial introduction by Rita in 2016. Salman Rushdie and Naomi Wolf wrote the book's blurbs. Her work received excellent reviews by World Literature Today, and it was advertised in the New York Review of Books. Rita is currently translating a novel on racism against Africans of color in Morocco by Ben Jelloun.

She has a very artistic daughter who is a renowned photographer. Rita's husband is a Professor of English, writer and classical pianist. Rita plays the piano herself and although I have not met her since year 2000, I have an image of her playing the piano, which when I had seen as a child (on BTV) had brought out much admiration, and now she has taken Bangladesh to international heights. In summary, I use Tagore's lines "Tumi kemon kore gaan koro he guni, ami obak hoye shuni".

*The author is an Academic and Nazrul exponent and translator*