

Zohra Segal, My Amazing Apa-Jaan



Jamila Massey
(as Neelam Kapoor in
EastEnders)

Jamila Massey (nee Chohan) was born in Simla where, before Independence, she went to the famous Auckland House School, established for the daughters of high-ranking British officers. Later, she graduated from King's College, London. She then worked in radio, television, films and in the theatre. She had a role in the well-known BBC radio soap opera *The Archers*, an Independent TV comedy series *Mind Your Language*, and the BBC TV soap opera *EastEnders*. She is now the senior most Asian actress in the United Kingdom. She has collaborated with her writer husband Reginald on three books: *The Music of India*, *The Dances of India*, and *The Immigrants*, a novel.

In life, it is a privilege and honour to meet and work with great artists who are also human beings *par excellence*. One such person is Zohra Segal, who lives in New Delhi. Universally known as Apa-Jaan (Beloved Elder Sister) she was also voted by the Indian media as 'The Darling of the Century'. Now over a hundred years young and full of energy, though wheelchair bound, she still has a glint in her eye. She loves shocking people. When asked by a journalist what she had enjoyed most in life she shouted: "Sex, Sex, and more Sex!" Age, I suppose, allows one to get away with anything.

Sahibzadi Zohra Begum Mumtaz-ullah Khan is descended from aristocratic Pathans connected to the Nawabs of Rampur. She was born in Saharanpur in 1912. After St. Mary's College in Lahore, while she was still *purdah nashin* (veiled), she decided to become a dancer. In those days, dancers were equated with courtesans and prostitutes. Naturally, her family protested. However, she asserted herself and managed to get to Germany in 1933 to train under Mary Wigman, the celebrated dance teacher and choreographer. Uday Shankar was then touring Europe and she asked him if she could join his company. He accepted her.

Later, Uday Shankar started an arts centre in Almora in the Himalayan foothills. Zohra joined his staff there. It was there that a handsome young painter named Kameshwar Segal came to study dance and choreography. Soon, Zohra and Kameshwar fell madly in love, even though Kameshwar was eight years younger than Zohra, and he was a Hindu, while she was a Muslim.

But they threw custom and convention to the winds, and decided to get married. The wedding took place in Allahabad in 1942. Jawaharlal Nehru, whose family home was in Allahabad, was thrilled with this Hindu-Muslim love match, and promised to attend the wedding. However, he was soon arrested by the British authorities and deported from Allahabad. He could not make it to the Kameshwar-Zohra wedding.

She joined the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), which consisted of progressive and secular intellectuals, poets, filmmakers and artists. Prithviraj Kapoor was the president, and she was the vice president. She appeared in *Dharti ke Lal* (1946) and in *Neecha Nagar* (1946), which won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. As one of the leading stars of Prithvi Theatres, she toured the country, performing plays that crusaded for communal harmony.

At the height of her career, in 1959, Kameshwar committed suicide. In desperation, she and her daughter Kiran and son Pavan left India for London. She struggled but soon carved a career in films, TV and on the stage.

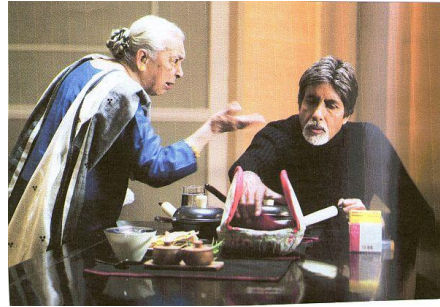
I worked with her in many productions, and learnt from her sheer professionalism, high standards and absolute dedication. In her personal life she was disciplined, ate sparingly, never smoked, and did not touch alcohol. She got up early and slept early. She practised yoga assiduously. Organized religion of any kind she avoided like the plague. She had witnessed how man had butchered man in the name of religion.



Jamila, right, with the iconic Zohra Segal in *Hedda in India*, an adaptation of Ibsen's great play staged in London in 1983. It was directed by Madhav Sharma, and received rave reviews.

In the late 1980s, her friends in India persuaded her to return to India, where she became an iconic figure. She worked well into her eighties and nineties.

The last film she made was *Cheeni Kum* (2007), in which she played the mother of Amitabh Bachchan. So impressed was the 'Big B' with his senior colleague that at the end of the last day of shooting he sent her champagne and a warm letter recognizing her supreme artistry.



Zohra Segal, left, with Amitabh Bachchan in [Cheeni Kum](#) (2007)

She is a Fellow of the Sangeet Natak Akademi and has been honoured with the Indian Republic's Padma Vibhushan. I am fortunate that the great lady counts me as a good friend. Her nickname for me is 'Jim-Jam.' ❖

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