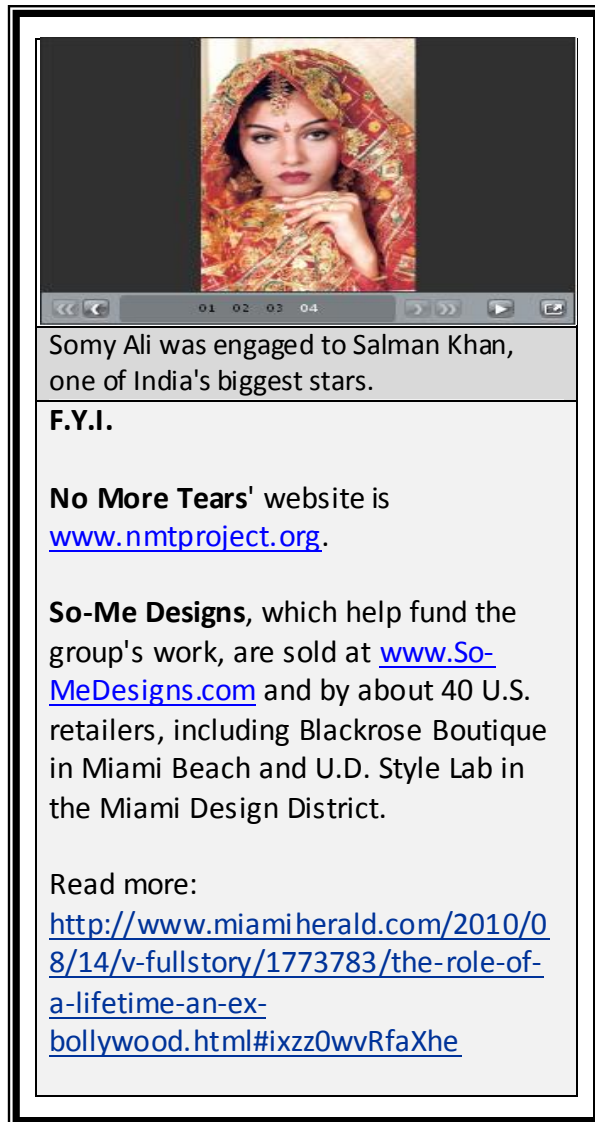


An ex-Bollywood star rescues immigrant women from abusive relationships

BY JULIE LANDRY LAVIOLETTE

Special to The Miami Herald



One afternoon, a neighbor knocked on Somy Ali's door. Bleeding from a head wound, the terrified woman said she had been beaten by her husband. Ali called 911.

That phone call would be a turning point for Ali, a former Bollywood actress and model more accustomed to London shopping sprees and headlines about her engagement to the Brad Pitt of India than humanitarian work.

Today, her four-bedroom Plantation home is the headquarters of No More Tears, a nonprofit Ali founded in 2006 to help immigrant women in South Florida escape domestic abuse.

The women (46 so far) hail from distant lands -- India, Russia, Guyana -- and nearby countries including Cuba and the Bahamas. They come from many faiths, and often arrive in South Florida via arranged marriages. They're cleaning women. Homemakers. Teachers.

Ali, 34, finds them apartments and rounds up donated furnishings. She lines up jobs or training, registers their kids in school and babysits when needed. All the while, she inches the women toward independence.

“It is like they are being held captive. They don't have a say,” she says. “It's ridiculous that this is happening in the United States. We have to learn about it and do something about it.”

Born in Karachi, Pakistan, to a wealthy, movie-producer father and an Iraqi-born, socialite mother, Ali spent her early childhood in a 26-bedroom mansion. By the time she was 9, her

parents had separated, and she relocated with her brother and mother to South Florida to be near relatives.

“It was a huge culture shock,” she says. “I didn't like it at all.”

At 15, enrolled at Miramar High, Ali was watching a Bollywood movie on television when actor Salman Khan caught her eye.

“When he saved this girl, I thought it was a message. I thought it was me.”

Ali told her mother she wanted to move to India to marry the heartthrob. She hatched a plan to break into the film business.

“I was so unhappy, and I wasn't doing well in school anyway,” she says. “I was so strong in my conviction that somehow I convinced my mom to send me.”

On a visit to India with her father, the young beauty with waist-length hair was discovered by a film producer as she sat in a hotel lobby. He enrolled her in acting, diction and language lessons. She lost her American accent and learned Hindi.

Then her dream began to come true: She caught actor Khan's eye as she dropped off photos at a modeling agency. He pursued her, and eventually cast her in his next film, a love story about a blind man and his muse.

They didn't make another movie together, but they quickly became the talk of India.

“I could walk on the street and snap my fingers and have anything I wanted,” Ali says. “There was always a party, always a new restaurant we had to try, always a new boutique opening. Salman was a way bigger star than I was, so photographers were always staking out the house.”

UNHAPPY ENDING

They planned to marry, but the fairy tale soon lost its luster.

“We were always fighting. He would flirt, and I would get mad.”

In one well-publicized fight in a hotel lobby, he pulled her hair and she kicked him.

“He was 10 years older and he was very possessive. He would say, ‘Don't talk to this one. Don't make friends with that one. Don't work with this actor.’ It grew to be a very twisted, warped place.”

When she learned Khan was cheating on her, Ali returned to her family in South Florida.

“I was really down. It started out like a fairy tale and ended like a nightmare . . . such a bad ending to such a cool story.”

The failed romance helps her relate to the women she helps.

“A lot of times when they say things to me, I think, ‘Salman used to say that.’ ”

Maya is one such woman. The Indian-born teacher came to the United States in an arranged marriage. For the next seven years, her husband beat her frequently, sometimes for such perceived offenses as undersalting his food.

Earlier this year, she escaped their Broward home through a bathroom window and sought help from Women in Distress. The battered women's shelter called Ali.

No More Tears paid \$800 for Maya's first month's rent and stocked her pantry with groceries. Every day for a month, Ali picked her up at 7:30 a.m. and took her to work. She enrolled her in driving lessons and took her used-car shopping.

“I'm here right now because of her,” Maya says. “She gave me a quality of life different from what I could have. She wants me to live independently to lead my own life.”

In April, Maya returned to India with her 5-year-old daughter to start her life anew.

When Ali started over here in 2000, she invested most of the \$800,000 she had earned in Bollywood in rental property. She got her GED, and then a degree in psychology from Nova Southeastern University in Davie.

After studying filmmaking in New York and Connecticut, she made documentaries on topics like teen suicide, domestic violence and the life of Mukhtaran Mai, a Pakistani woman subjected to gang rape by her village council.

“My life had been so superficial . . . I never knew any better,” Ali says. “But when I moved here and got an education, I began to evolve.”

In 2006, she created So-Me Designs, a line of knit tops printed with human-rights, pro-peace and go-green messages. (The slogan on a baby's onesie: “Make Me, Not War.”)

“I was making clothing on human rights issues, but I asked myself, ‘How are you really helping people?’ ”

Then came the knock on the door.

In August 2006, her Bangladeshi neighbor came begging for help. She had fresh bruises on her forehead and scabbed-over cuts from being pushed into a wall. She had come to South Florida in 1996 in an arranged marriage, and had endured 10 years of abuse.

“I didn't know what the steps were,” Ali says. “I just knew I had to help her.”

She found the woman and her 6-year-old son in an apartment. She paid for a divorce lawyer. She covered her rent for four months, until she got a job.

Today, the woman has joint custody of the boy and is studying to be a registered nurse, Ali says.

A month after the incident, Ali formed No More Tears and designated 10 percent of the proceeds from her clothing line to the charity.

Initially, she focused on helping immigrants from Pakistan and India.

“I spoke the language. I knew the culture, and I thought I had sufficient clout in the Pakistani and Indian communities.”

But she broadened her reach when others began calling.

There is Andrea, who came from Costa Rica with the promise of medical school. But her husband denied her schooling and she felt like a prisoner in her home.

“I felt threatened because he had a gun in the closet,” she says. “So many days I wanted to die, just to disappear.”

No More Tears paid Andrea's rent for six months, until she found work. Divorce proceedings are underway.

There is Ann, from Jamaica, whose husband supported his drug and alcohol habit with her nursing paychecks. He began to verbally assault her, then used a switchblade to gash her stomach and back.

No More Tears got Ann settled in an apartment. She changed jobs, filed for a restraining order against her husband and has begun divorce proceedings.

Ali posts fliers about No More Tears in ethnic markets.

“No matter how oppressed women are, men will still send them to buy groceries. I know that from my culture. That's probably the only freedom they have.”

FINANCIAL STRUGGLE

In November 2009, photographs of singer Fergie wearing Ali's shirts appeared in Us Weekly, briefly boosting sales. Proceeds netted No More Tears about \$1,000 a year, but a tight economy cut that to about \$200.

Ali has put more than \$45,000 of her personal funds into the nonprofit. Her savings depleted, she dips into her rental income to pay client's attorney fees, utilities and grocery bills.

It costs about \$2,500 to help each woman. No More Tears gets no government funding, says board member Laura Finley, a former training manager at Women in Distress. A \$1,200 grant and occasional donations have helped, says Finley, an assistant professor at Barry University, but the group is desperate for outside funding.

Help is sporadic, coming largely in response to e-mail pleas to friends and Facebook posts asking for household goods. Last year, Finley gave her 2000 station wagon to a client.

``We're working to establish a concrete budget so we can figure out how many cases to take on in a year," Finley says.

Ali says she has no regrets about leaving her Bollywood life behind.

``I can't think of anything else I want to do that makes me this happy. I look at myself in the mirror and say, `You know what? You're saving lives.' This is the happiest chapter in my book."

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