

ARRANGED HAPPINESS

A film by Daniela Dar-Creutz

TREATMENT



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ARRANGED HAPPINESS... *a fictional introduction*



Lake Dal, Srinagar, Kashmir

Flashback / Re-Enactment

It is the year 1985. It is spring in Kashmir and the grassland and fruit trees show their first timid blossoms. A seven year-old girl, in traditional 'firaq yazaar' dress runs happily through a bright yellow field of rapeseed. Is she chasing a butterfly? Waheeda Banu skips innocently through the ocean of rapeseed taking in the fresh Himalayan air. In the distance she hears her mother calling her home. But why should she? Waheeda is in no mood to listen to orders. There is too much to discover.

Then, all of a sudden, she is stunned by the sound of a massive explosion. Waheeda recoils and her tiny body falls heavily to the ground like a sack of coals and she is swallowed by the yellow meadow. Apart from bird song there is complete stillness and silence. But then there is a rustling sound in the meadow and Waheeda lifts her tiny head curiously, and with anxious eyes she stares at two huge military boots in front of her. She lifts her head higher and looks bewildered into the hazel eyes of Neeraj Sharma, an Indian soldier. He is armed, carrying a machine gun. Neeraj Sharma lifts Waheeda up and places her gently on her feet. Waheeda's mother sprints towards him and pulls her daughter away, looking anxiously at the bearded face of the Sikh soldier. She tries to communicate with him, first in Kashmiri, then in Urdu, then in a few words of broken Hindi. But the man doesn't understand her. . .



Waheeda's childhood was not that long ago, and memories of the fear and deprivation her family has endured still hang in the air.

The family lives in Srinagar, a bustling Asian university town and former imperial seat that over its long, winding history became one of the most important cross points for trade caravans such as The Silk Road. Kashmir was a key center for commerce in the near East, between central and Southeast Asia.



The current conflict over Kashmir dates back to the partition of Pakistan and India in 1945 when both countries laid claim to the region.

Waheeda, aged 27, sits cross-legged on the floor of her brightly decorated room in the Dar family's current home. She sits quietly brooding, her forehead creased and her eyes full of concern. In front of her is an old sewing machine. She turns the wheel and concentrates on her sewing.



Daughter, Waheeda Banu

I ask her brother, Ashiq Dar, who is standing with us functioning as a translator, why Waheeda so often seems sad? He asks her - and she explains that it is because she has so many responsibilities. She is leading a double life in her roles as both a daughter and a mother figure. She has been the female head of household since her mother died five years ago; her father gives her the small wage he earns working in the fields, and she cares for the needs of their relatives, buys food and cooks for everyone – and she has other worries.

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Why, I ask?

She says she is worried about her future. She wants to get married and finally be

free. But will they find a good husband for her? And when, at last, will there be enough money to pay for her dowry and wedding celebrations? She gives her brother a critical and concerned look.



Brother, Ashiq Dar



Waheeda Dar

Ashiq (26) has been saving for years, but he still isn't able to set a date. Moreover, he doesn't want to admit that he doesn't have the money together yet.

Ashiq explains, that Waheeda's life will change tremendously after she is married, and to her advantage. She will have fewer responsibilities and might even be able to enjoy life for a while, should she and her husband decide not to have children right away.

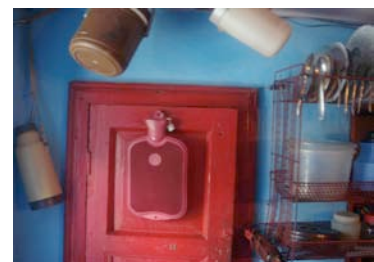
Waheeda looks at us curiously and wants to know what I asked him. Ashiq chuckles and says, "Oh, nothing!"

She looks at me and asks me if I would like to have the sleeves of my dress gathered into pleats or flowing. Flowing, I say. I am about to get an Indian Sutra dress, which I will wear to an upcoming celebration. Waheeda promises me I will look like a true Kashmiri woman.

Later, the family sits for dinner on comfortable floor cushions in their simple, brightly painted, blue and red kitchen.



Kitchen of the Dar Family



Food is laid out on a colorful cloth rug and I learn how to eat with my hands. We eat vegetables with mutton prepared by Waheeda. Everybody laughs and seems at ease. But after dinner, Waheeda has the same downcast expression as before.

Flashback / Re-Enactment

(B/W) The old Dar family home lay in the midst of a scenic island between the

canals of Srinagar. It seems so peaceful at that moment that one could almost forget the family lives in a region in crisis.

In the kitchen the mother turns on the radio. Seven-year-old Waheeda plays a game with wooden dice. The news is of no interest to her, but her mother listens to the Kashmiri newsreader with a look of deep concern.

Radio Kashmir/News-excerpt, 1985. . .

(Archived report laid under pictures)

"Indian security forces have announced they have killed the commander of the largest Kashmiri insurgent group. Abdul Rashid, the military commander of Hezbul-Mujahedeen, was shot during a raid in the Indian part of Kashmir, says a military reporter. . . Security forces were tipped off and laid seige to a house in Srinagar where the shooting started. . .



Kashmir Liberation Front



Soldiers patrolling empty streets

The mother gets up and nervously takes a bottle of pills out of a cupboard. She swallows three of them and looks at the clock. Her husband, Mohammad Iqbal Dar, hasn't returned yet, and it is nearly dark. . .

...FADE to the weathered, sun darkened face of father Mohammad Iqbal Dar (56), whose hair is now snow-white. Iqbal smokes his water pipe contentedly. He is a quiet man, but has alert, often smiling Kashmiri dark brown eyes.



Next to him sits Bashir, his son-in law (35) and his son Ashiq (26). They drink savory Kashmiri tea and discuss Waheeda's future. The time has arrived to find her a husband. No one needs to know that Ashiq doesn't quite have the money together yet. The marriage will of course take place once the money is available.

In the meantime, they can start the search for a suitable match.

Ashiq is worried, but what can he do? His father has already borne the expense of dowries and weddings for his two elder sisters, so he is obliged to take care of the dowry and wedding for his two younger sisters. Moreover, they want him to marry too, so that his wife will replace Waheeda's position in the family.

Ashiq is the younger brother of Waheeda and the family's only son. He studied English and Commerce at college in Srinagar before beginning a degree in medicine. His studies were interrupted seven years ago by a terrorist attack on his university in 2001. At that time young Kashmiri men were easily suspected of belonging to militant extremist groups. Indian security forces made many groundless arrests. Ashiq's parents were extremely worried about their only son's safety and decided to send him away to Kerala, in southern India where he worked in a relative's handicraft shop.



Ashiq Ahmad Dar and his niece

Ashiq thinks for a moment, saying finally that he has always felt very close to Waheeda.

Flashback / Re-Enactment

(B/W) Ashiq as a young boy, aged 6, sits near the canal outside his family home and cautiously taking apart the family radio. He cleans the individual parts with water from the canal. His oldest sister comes and is shocked by what he is doing. She shouts, "Why are you destroying our radio?" and tries to slap him. Ashiq runs away. He really just wanted to clean it!

Later on in the kitchen, Waheeda (7) and Ashiq (6) sit together and try to put the damaged radio back together. It simply won't work anymore. Waheeda takes the radio and smashes it in a fit of rage. Ashiq laughs, but he also knows in his heart that it wasn't his best idea to begin with.

In the background we hear explosions. The kids lift their heads in fear and their laughing ceases instantly. They are as quiet as mice.

THE SEARCH FOR A GROOM



The Wedding Agent & father Iqbal Dar



Waheeda

The Dar family discretely lets it be known in their community and through friends that they have a beautiful daughter of marriageable age. Waheeda's father Iqbal starts making initial inquiries about potential young men. . .

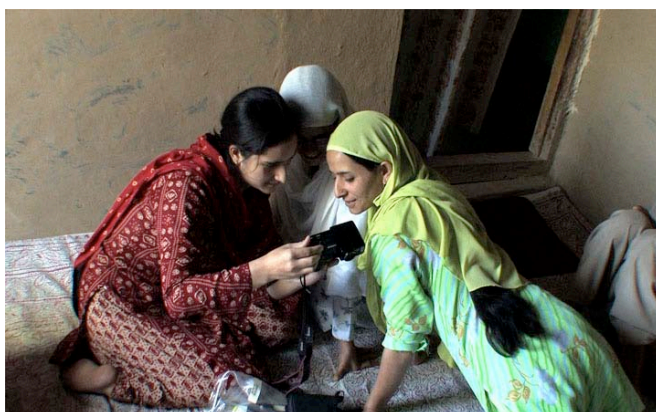
The next scene is of a matchmaker and friend of the family, who has come for a visit. He talks first with Iqbal and then Waheeda enters the kitchen. The matchmaker asks her questions and tries to get some idea of her personality.

** (The matchmaker doesn't get any money for gathering this information. His pay usually is in form of a tip known as 'bakshish', which could take the form of an article of clothing, or a couple of thousand Rupees. He only gets this if the match he makes works out.)

A few days later. . .

A letter arrives with a picture of a potential groom!

Waheeda and her younger sister, Masrath (18), huddle over the photograph secretly in another room. It would be disrespectful to do it in front of the father. Masrath will in fact be the subtle messenger who informs their father Iqbal and their brother Ashiq as to whether Waheeda has taken a liking to the man in the picture.



On this occasion, Waheeda is not interested in the candidate and the search continues.

We see Waheeda alone, lost in thought, surrounded by her sewing things.

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A beautiful length of silk fabric is spread out in front of her. It isn't a dress for her, it's for a customer. She strokes it dreamily imagining herself in it. But soon, she goes on dreaming, she will be sewing a couple of beautiful gowns for herself. . .



Waheeda left school in the 9th grade after militant separatists burnt down the school building. Not long after, she began to take acting and singing lessons, and her career took off when she was discovered by the Kashmiri television community. Over the next five years she became quite famous.

CUT onto a graveyard close by the Hazrat-Bal Mosque.

Waheeda enters the nearby washroom and cleans her face. Then she takes off her shoes and kneels to pray.



Waheeda at Hazrat-Bal Mosque

Cut to Ashiq walking to their mother's grave.

He stands there contemplating the past, his forehead creased. He takes in the early morning plea of the muezzin who calls for prayer from a minaret. The muezzin's voice is piercing, intriguing and lyrical.

The call to prayer carries on into the next scene. . .



Hazrat-Bal Moschee

LOSSES . . .

Flashback / Re-Enactment

(B/W) It is late evening and all around the lake Dal, the 'call to prayer' echoes from the minarets through the neighborhood.

Kitchen: Waheeda (16) and Ashiq (15) are being confronted by a separatist who is holding a gun, which he casually points in their direction. The situation appears threatening, but Waheeda holds her ground. She is tired of their home constantly being invaded in the middle of the night by militants who demand shelter with threats that otherwise someone will get hurt. She musters all her courage and shouts at the man: "Just go away! We don't want you here! My family will be in grave danger if the Indian security forces find you here! Go and never bring a gun into this house again!"

Ashiq stands fearfully next to his older sister.

Still standing near the grave, Ashiq recounts that it was very courageous but also very dangerous for Waheeda to confront a separatist so boldly. He himself was unable to utter a single word. The family was frequently surrounded by violent conflict and feared for their lives when Separatists showed up in their neighborhood. Ashiq explains that the safest times during this period were when an Indian military convoy built camp next to their house and stayed in the neighborhood for several months. They became friends with the soldiers and no Separatists dared to come near their district.



Waheeda is still praying. . .

A hawk circles the mosque's copula. It is quiet now.

CUT to a montage of Waheeda performing household chores.



Shortly after the altercation between Waheeda and the separatist in the kitchen, their mother died. She suffered from a heart condition and the constant stress took its toll. It was traumatic for the whole family because Mehra Banu had been so strong spirited despite her failing health. Iqbal mourned the death of his wife for a year before coming to terms with it, and finally decided never to remarry.

But that wasn't the only cruel twist of fate for young Waheeda. In addition, her father and her brother Ashiq began urging her to give up her career as an actress in the TV world.

Waheeda explains herself while cleaning rice. Initially she was inconsolable, but slowly she accepted the guidance of her family. I asked how that was possible, how could she forsake the career she loved so much and for which she had worked so hard? And how could Waheeda consent to this decision without being untrue to herself?

EXCURSIONS. . . *and unanswered questions*

We accompany the 15-member extended family on a shikara excursion.

Ashiq explains that in bad times his parents distracted themselves from their worries by going on nature outings. One of their favorite excursions was renting a large 'shikara,' a Kashmiri gondola, and going out on the lake with other family members. The conversation turns to wedding traditions...

In Islam it is important over a lifetime to collect 'points', he explains, because these will be added up on Judgment Day. The more points one has, the more likely it is they will be permitted into heaven. Getting married gives you one point.



The Dar Family on a shikara

Ashiq goes on to say that in the old days, people got married between the ages of 18 and 21. At that age, people are most hot-blooded and are less likely to stray from their partners like Westerners, who try out many different partners, tend to do. But, he is quick to add, that has changed in Kashmir. Most couples now marry when they are in their mid-twenties. When I ask him whether marriage in his culture constitutes more a means of safety than it does a love relationship, he hesitates. He explains that most couples indeed only fall in love after they get married. I ask him what he thinks about marriage and divorce in Western societies? Ashiq says, there is a deep underlying understanding between couples in the West, and at the same time more freedom and independence. But as to whether or not that is necessarily better, he is unsure. He says that when a couple fights together in Kashmir, they usually sit together and try to talk it out, then they will make love and be at peace again. A divorce is shameful and very painful.

I ask him if his parents married for love and he says, no.



Mohammad Iqbal Dar



Waheeda prepares traditional Kashmiri butter tea on the boat for the whole family. She serves fresh puri, a kind of deep fried bread; the girls laugh and sing folk songs, talk on their mobile phones and send text messages, and the family elders share a hookah.

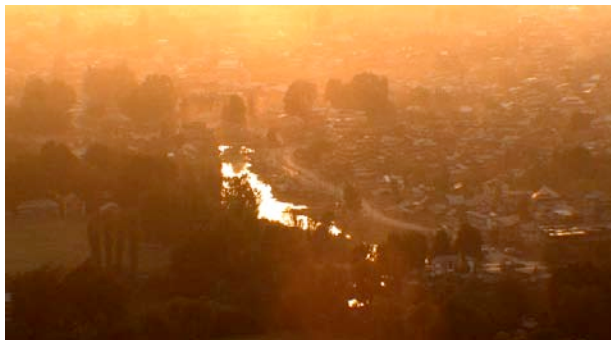
IT IS EARLY EVENING IN SRINAGAR. . .

And the search for a groom continues.

The city lights glitter reflected on the lake's surface, and the carved wooden houseboats are gold in the sunset. The lake Dal is nestled in a snow-covered Himalayan valley.

Ashiq's school friend Kurshid (28), paddles through the canals of lake Dal, passing floating restaurants, shops, vegetable gardens and the old imperial summer palace.

Kurshid drops anchor and enters a prosperous neighborhood. He walks down some alleyways, speaks to one neighbor and talks to another shopkeeper. He collects information about Javid - Waheeda's next potential groom - who is friends with Bashir, a relative of the Dar family who also acts as a wedding agent.



He paddles back to the Dar house where he is welcomed with tea in the kitchen and discusses the results of his research with the whole family.

The family likes what they hear.

Javid seems to have a good track record. He is the son of a tradesman, a saffron dealer, has a good education and seems to be financially secure. The only thing is that he hasn't built a house yet for his new wife. That might take two or three years, and Waheeda wants to get married much sooner than that. They are unable to reach a final decision at this stage, but does she like him?

Waheeda stands in the doorway and anxiously listens to the conversation.



It is decided that Waheeda's brother-in-law, Bashir, will contact Javid's family.

The next morning, Ashiq returns home with bad news about Javid. He enters the kitchen, where Waheeda and Masrat are preparing lunch and tells them that Javid spent a month in prison a couple of years prior.

CUT to the family assembled in the living room for an emergency meeting about Javid's suitability as a groom.



Bashir arrives, angrily accusing the family of doubting his prudence in approving of Javid as a potential husband for Waheeda. They urge Bashir to make a phone call to Javid and confront him with the fact of his arrest and incarceration.

CUT to Bashir upstairs placing a call to Javid. Ashiq is listening in trying to gauge Javid's reaction. A detailed explanation ensues.



Ashiq and Bashir, the Agent

The following day, father Iqbal, the agent Bashir, Ashiq and a family friend walk around Javid's neighborhood and make more discrete inquiries about him.

The Spying Team:



Bashir, the Agent

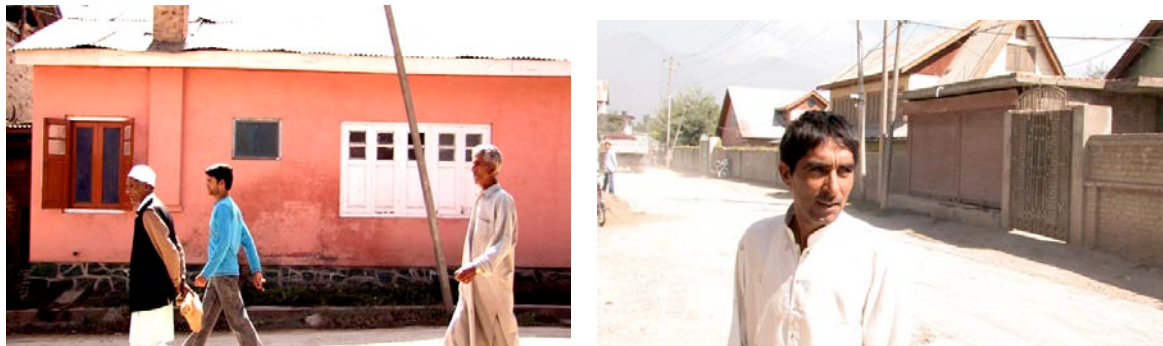
Father Iqbal Dar

Gaffar, family friend

Ashiq Dar

They ask people who live in the area what they knew about him, ask whether they knew about his stay in prison, and what their overall impression of him was.

Satisfied that his reputation did not seem to be tainted by the incident that resulted in his jail term, they decide to pay his family a visit.



They are welcomed and are served local pastries and tea. They chat warmly, before turning the conversation to the building of a marital home for the couple, and are shown the property of saffron fields. Ashiq carefully but unobtrusively observes his potential brother-in-law.

After a while Iqbal announces politely that they must take their leave. There is no explicit statement of what will happen next at this stage, but Iqbal and Ashiq feel very good about the meeting.

Four days later preparations are being made for another meeting between the two families. The mother of the groom, accompanied by a young female member of Javid's extended family, walks through the narrow alleys of Srinagar to pay the Dar family a visit. The mother brings a younger member of the family with her because so there is someone who is of Waheeda's generation to evaluate if her brother will find the bride suitable.

Waheeda sits nervously in the kitchen. She wears a beautiful Sutna dress she made herself and has prepared all kinds of tasty dishes. Masrat, her younger sister, has helped by the preparations and is as excited as her sister. They giggle in anticipation.



Javid's mother and Waheeda

Javid's family arrives and is seated in the kitchen. They observe Waheeda discretely though the intentions are clear. It is a very formal, though relaxed occasion and takes a measured pace. Javid's family seems reserved, but they approve of Waheeda strongly.

As soon the family has left, Masrat, the youngest sister begins to cry. She realizes she is losing her older sister (Waheeda), and that after the wedding, she will be left alone.



Masrat (18), Waheeda's sister

A SECRET MEETING...

It is at this point that Waheeda negotiates an opportunity to meet Javid. It is to be arranged secretly by Ashiq. Usually the groom is given a ring at such meetings to symbolize commitment.

Waheeda dresses up for the occasion and her long experience in show business pays off. Masrath helps her put up her long, shiny black hair in an elegant chignon.

The arranged meeting happens in one of the Mogul gardens near the mosque. Waheeda and Javid speak briefly and she gives him the ring.



Later, we see Waheeda again, and she is excited. She liked the young man and the prospect that her life will take a new turn soon makes her happy.

THE VISIT TO THE PRIEST...

Both sets of parents decide to consult a priest to get a "setar wochun," a forecast for Waheeda and Javid's proposed marriage.



The couple's names are compared in the book of names and the priest makes a numerological forecast for them. The priest is able to tell through these methods what kind of difficulties a couple will face in the future, if they will fight a lot, and whether they will be happy. If his reports don't indicate that the couple is a good match, they may still marry, but it would then be advised that Waheeda's name be changed.

Ashiq and his older sister, Sharifa, go to a local priest near the center of town. Seated in a small room at the top of a winding staircase, the priest is surrounded by people who have come for healing and all manner of divinations. He sits on the floor at a low desk with books, several pots of colored ink and a fountain pen.

When it is finally their turn, the priest counts prayer beads as he consults the book of names, finally taking out a piece of yellowed tissue paper and writing something inscrutable in different colored inks.



He folds this paper and binds it with black thread to make an amulet, which is given to Sharifa for safekeeping. He has good results overall for the new alliance, but advises that Waheeda's name be changed and gives some suggestions.

Waheeda and Javid's families only meet an additional two times before the engagement becomes official.



Javid and Bashir

At the next meeting, Waheeda will be given gifts of gold jewelry and money. At a further meeting, Iqbal and Ashiq will also bring a gift of money to the Javid family and discuss whether the families want an engagement party or only a wedding party, and the terms of the dowry. The families agree to an engagement within the next four months, and at the full moon after an additional four months, right before the Ramazan, the wedding preparations are to begin. For the dowry, Ashiq offers an amount he thinks he will be able to save by that time: 239,760 Indian Rupees (ca. \$6,800 Dollars). Javid's family agrees to give Waheeda a total of 40,280 INR (ca. \$800 Dollars) in gifts of gold jewelry and money.

Finally the deal is brokered and both sides are satisfied. A date for the wedding ceremony is set.

On the evening before the engagement is made official, the families hold parallel but separate celebrations at their homes for their extended family and friends. This party usually lasts the whole night. There is dancing and live traditional "sofiana music", a down tempo form of instrumental favored by the older generation. For the younger generation they play "duff music," a faster more upbeat type of music. Four musicians play the rabbab, a form of guitar, the sarram, a sort of fiddle, and the vut drum.

THE ENGAGEMENT. . . *preparations begin*

When the engagement is made official, the first in a series of small functions celebrating the match is held at the Dar family home and a *Wazwan Mishani* meal, an elaborate, traditional feast usually prepared with lamb, is served. Everyone apart from the groom is present.



Waheeda receives gold bangles and other jewelry as well as money. And most important: The engagement ring! This is given to her by the family rather than the groom himself. The couple won't see each other again until the wedding night.



Now that the arrangements have been made, neither side wants to appear hasty or greedy. They both need time to get their affairs in order, and at each new stage in the preparations is marked with a *Wazwan Mishani*.

During this period, we see Waheeda smiling a lot as she goes about her daily tasks.



THE WEDDING

On the wedding day itself no religious ceremonies are conducted. But in the old tradition, Javid will collect Waheeda at her house with great pomp and circumstance. He arrives in the evening by torch light, accompanied by musicians, and a procession of friends and family wearing their most elaborate clothing. There is a further exchange of small gifts included and the last *mishani* where up to 50 different dishes that have been carefully prepared days in advance.



Celebrations continue until dawn, when finally, Waheeda gives a sign that she is tired and wants to retire. She is lifted into a palankin, a sedan chair, and carried by the procession to Javid's home.

The wedding night. . .

The couple is finally permitted their privacy – but in an adjacent room, Waheed's aunt is listening for sounds which would indicate any problems in the marital bed. She might even knock on the couple's door to make sure the consummation was successful. If not, the marriage could still be annulled. It is very important that the groom is healthy and able to produce descendants as this is the family's only retirement plan.



The following day, the most important *mishani* feast is held. It is the largest celebration with all the trimmings, and takes place at the new marital home. The relatives are indulged with even more delicacies, and Waheeda is welcomed officially into her new family. Only when this final *wathal mishani* has taken place, the marriage is considered complete. At last Waheeda and Javid's union has been blessed by all, who wish them in excess of 100 sons.

The Camera catches Waheeda's joyful smile at this final banquet and lingers there.

A love song is performed by Kashmiri songstress Deepali Watal, and the gentle music stays with us into the next picture...

Flashback / Re-Enactment

(Color) . . . It is spring, 1985 in Kashmir and the grassland and fruit trees show their first timid blossoms. Two children, a seven year-old girl and a six year-old boy, both in traditional costume, run happily through a bright yellow field of rapeseed. (Same shot as in the beginning)

Both children skip blythly throught a Himalayan valley meadow. They rush past the camera laughing (in slowmotion). As they dash by, the young Waheeda stops and looks back. She smiles with a hint of relief. That day, she didn't encounter the bearded Sikh soldier. Either, that was only a bad dream, or the war is over at last.

END

