

FILM

DOR

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Nagesh Kuckunoor's "Dor-Thread" (Hindi, Colour, 120 mins), has a plot based on ties and cultivated bonds, which string together luscious images. Somewhere in the mountains of Himachal Pradesh, Zeenat (Gul Panag) is on a ladder, fixing an above ground window. Her friend, Amir offers marriage for permanency of friendships and love ; but he is going to Saudi Arabia, shortly, for work. Zeenat is alone, residing with an old relative. Amir and Zeenat get married, but without the presence and blessings of Amir's parents. The narrative suddenly shifts to the deserts of Rajasthan, where Rajput Randhir is returning on a camel cart to village, Rohan. He is a landowner, but in severe debts. His son, Shankar marries Mira (Ayesha Takia). Shankar is also proceeding to Saudi Arabia, for a job ; and his relatives see him off at the railway station in the desert.

The left behind wives, Zeenat and Mira, collect money from the village post offices, where the husbands have remitted money orders from the middle - east. Zeenat gives the full remittance to Amir's parents as her pay was sufficient. Mira, too, shares the money with Shankar's family ; which leads to large reductions in Randhir's debts and plans for a renovation of the old and large *haveli*. Occasionally, Mira speaks to Shankar on the cell phone, borrowed from a local villager, Zeenat also speaks to her husband, from a local STD booth. One day the village post office informs that there was no fresh money order from Shankar. Mira rings up Shankar's telephone in Saudi Arabia, and is told that Shankar has expired. The cell phone falls from her hands, and she collapses on the desert sands. Zeenat runs across foot bridges and mountain roads, and receives a telephone message that Amir is under custody, facing an imminent death sentence, for killing a man. With Shankar's death, the rural, women family members, wipe off vermilion from Mira's forehead, and remove all jewellery from her hands and neck. Mr Natarajan, from the Union Ministry of External Affairs arrives in the Himachal village, and informs Zeenat that Amir and Shankar were friends and were residing together. Shankar fell from the tenth floor, and died. There were no witnesses, but suspicion was on Amir. As per Saudi law, if Shankar's wife pardons Amir, then Amir could be pardoned ; otherwise conviction was expected within two months. He gives blank forms pardon declaration to Zeenat.

Determined to search for Shankar's wife in Rajasthan, Zeenat with a photo and a small travel bag, travels downhill on a truck, with a Sikh driver, known to Mr Baig, Zeenat's benefactor. She dines in roadside 'dhabas', and sleeps on a 'charpoy', in the open air, Mira mourns away sitting and sleeping on the floor. Zeenat arrives in a Rajasthan town, and sits over a frugal breakfast in a shabby restaurant. A trickster and a traveling actor (Shreyas Talpade), posing as an astrologer sits opposite Zeenat. He forecasts that Zeenat is searching for a woman. Distracting Zeenat's attention by singing Hindi film songs, he steals Zeenat's bag and disappears. In the deserts of Rajasthan, Mira is delivered

Shankar's suitcase, with his clothes. Clinging on to a red shawl, she cries; and is consoled with affections by Shankar's grand mother. Mr.Chopra, a factory manager arrives in the haveli as a tenant. Zeenat dreams of Amir. One evening at a deserted, roadside water tap, she is attacked by two goons. The trickster appears wearing a police uniform, and drives away the sinister men. He returns the stolen bag. From Amir and Shankar's photo, he recognizes the Rajasthan area from a background wall photo, indicating blue coloured small houses. At a photo studio, posing as an income tax inspector, he obtains a blow up of the photo and an enlargement of the backdrop. The blue houses could be in Jodhpur. A retired teacher recognizes the backdrop photo couple as Rajput, from Mira's locket. Zeenat and the trickster rush to the Agnihotri clan village, Siroha, 50 kms from Jodhpur.

Zeenat discovers the house of Shankar Singh, and meets Shankar's parents. She relates that Amir and Shankar were friends, and were living in the same house; and Amir could never have done such a crime, Randhir Singh and his wife drive out Zeenat. Shankar's younger brother abuses her, while Shankar's mother spits on her. The family does not inform Shankar's wife, Mira. The trickster keeps spying on Mira, and spots that Mira leaves the haveli once a day, to visit a temple in the sand dunes. Zeenat takes residence in a hut. She meets Mira on the temple verandah, and pleads for help, without disclosing any details. Mira has been visiting the 'mandir' with Leela, a small school going girl, who fetches water. Zeenat and Mira keep meeting at the temple, and a friendship develops, When a baby, Leela was thrown into a well, and rescued by Shankar. Zeenat, though a Muslim, also ties prayer scarfs on the tree, before the mandir. She instructs dark blue clad Mira to follow her conscience, and do whatever she likes. They have 'rasgollas' together dance with Hindi film tunes, watch a Hindi film with tears provoked by the sorrowful script, and go for a camel ride. Zeenat insists on Mira to live a life without fearing others. The trickster also dances to radio music. Zeenat tells Mira that she is searching for her husband, who is reportedly working in a factory in Rajasthan. She feels that hiding facts from Mira, was a deception.

One night in a drunken state, the trickster verbally expresses love for Zeenat. Next morning he leaves in a truck, promising to speak to Zeenat's folks in Himachal. It is 'diwali' night, and Randhir Singh and Mr Chopra the tenant and factory manager are drinking. Chopra offers lacs of rupees for a short term contract marriage with Mira, and in return write off, all of Randhir's debts. Soon the trickster returns, with message from Himachal, that Amir would be convicted in two days. Mr Natarajan, the government official was waiting in Himachal for the pardon declaration. When Mira gifts a red dress - which was Shankar's first gift - to Zeenat, as she could not wear it again, Zeenat discloses that Shankar died allegedly at Amir's hands. Mira slaps Zeenat, and states that the killer had seized everything : husband, love, and freedom, Zeenat pleads that Amir could never kill and quotes the Koran for forgiveness, Mira declines to sign the declaration, and feels that trust on friendship has emerged to serve own ends. She picks up the red dress, and ties it on the tree. When Mira leaves, Zeenat falls to the ground crying and seeking forgiveness. Meanwhile, the child, Leela has informed Mira's in-laws of meeting Zeenat at the temple.

Friendship with the husband's killer is denounced, and Mira's freedom stopped. Safety of the daughter-in-law was coming at a high price. When the father-in-law pulls Mira, she protests as only the son had the right to touch her. Mira is locked up. Zeenat walks over the sands, with her bag, Shankar's grandmother opens the locked chamber door, and advises, Mira to exercise her will. The mother-in-law moves aside when told by the grandmother that she could also be confined. Mira rushes to the temple, and finds the blank declaration papers, alongwith a locket from Amir to Zeenat, tied on a red scarf. A letter from Zeenat seeks forgiveness, friendship and affections. Picking up the declaration form and the locket, Mira scampers over the sand towards the railway station, where Zeenat is waiting for a north bound train. When Mira arrives panting at the station, the train is slowly leaving with Zeenat sitting on a window seat. Mira spots Zeenat, rushes along and hands over the signed declaration, displaying the locket on her neck. She runs alongside the train, while Zeenat has hands outstretched along the door. With a spurt, Mira jumps on the train, and Zeenat and Mira hug each other.

Kuckunoor's screenplay brings out social reality, but the narrative is often induced, and certain episodes appear implausible and stereotype. Clever plotting and siting of the storylines, allows Sudeep Chatterjee's camera to explore in wide vista, the dazzling mountains and the deserts. The screenplay, however, does not come up with enough interesting justifications, for the sudden shifts in locales. This makes the unfolding plot to feel like lazy storytelling. All the same, the visuals are enthralling. The acting by the two feminine leads is captivating ; but Shreyas Talpade remains a caricature. The long and overhead shots design the characters and the motivations, besides fate. The narrative is full of incidents, and the emotional realism is unsparing. But the social and moral equations steadily crumble, as the dramatic range is limited. *~ ~ ~*