Where is My Mother?

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When Bahadur Yunus Khan of the Baluch Regiment looked at the sky, the moon had completed half of its nightly journey. He had seen the moon and the stars after four days. Where had he been during that time? Down, deep down, in the realm of nightmares ... where all the ditches were filled with human blood. Where he had, like a subtle magician, sprayed the land with bullets. But, but that wasn't a nightmare. He was fighting for the creation of a new country. And the call for the freedom of one's country must be obeyed; the self must be sacrificed! So, where had he been over the last four days? Everywhere! Gujranwala, Wazirabad, Lahore! In his truck. Tearing across the land. How far had he travelled? For whom, for what? For his country, his

people, and ... ? And for himself! No, he didn't love himself that much! Standing on a road which stretched far into the horizon, Yunus Khan watched the flames as they leapt up from the villages burning all around. He had heard those screams before. People always scream when their houses are set on fire. He had witnessed other fires before. He had seen children thrown into fires, and women and men. He had seen neighbourhoods burn all night and had seen charred bodies in every street. Was he disturbed by what he had seen? Why should he have been? Freedom can't be won without bloodshed, revolutionary wars can't be fought without bloodshed and ... and his small and lovely country had been born out of such a revolutionary struggle! That's right. He had fought day and night for it. His eyes were full of sleep now, but he had to reach Lahore. Get there on time. To make sure that no kafir was left alive.

Even on that cold night, the very thought of a kafir made Yunus Khan's blood boil with anger. He felt as if all his wounds had reopened again. He started the truck again. And drove it fast.

Death had passed through the villages on both sides of the road. Charred and mutilated bodies lay in piles near fields of wheat. Cries of "Allah-ho-Akbar" and "Har Har Mahadev" could be heard at a distance. "Catch him, catch him" ... "Kill him, kill him" ... "No, no, please no" ... Yunus Khan heard all of them. He was witnessing the birth of a new Mughal Empire. Marvellous, far greater than the first one.

The moon was disappearing below the horizon. The misty light of the moon had a tinge of blue. Perhaps, the blood spilt on the earth had turned into poison and spread in the sky.

"Stop, stop the truck," Yunus Khan shouted, as his hand reached for the brake. What was that? A faint, small

shadow! A shadow? No – a little girl lay unconscious by the roadside. Her salwar was soaked in blood.

Yunus Khan stepped down from the truck. She had been wounded. But why did he stop? Had he ever stopped for the dead before? But she was a wounded child ... So what? He had seen countless bodies of dead women. No, he had to pick her up. If he could save her then ... then ... But why did he want to do that? Yunus Khan couldn't understand it himself. But he couldn't leave her there, even if she was a kafir.

Yunus Khan picked her up in his strong arms. Laid her down on the seat of the truck. The child's eyes were shut. Her thick hair was wet. With blood, perhaps. And, on her face? Her pale face was splattered with blood.

Yunus Khan ran his fingers through her hair. His fingers got covered with blood. Was he trying to comfort her? No, Yunus Khan had never been so sentimental before. Why did he feel pity now – why did his hands touch her with so much compassion? He didn't understand it himself. Little did the child, who lay unconscious, know that the hands which had killed her brothers were now caressing her so lovingly.

The girl lay in Yunus Khan's arms. A vision rose before his eyes — not the eyes of a murderer, but the eyes of a man full of veneration ... the vision of a very cold night in Quetta. He saw himself standing, with his arms around his pretty sister, Nooran. She was twelve years old. They watched their mother, who was a widow, close her eyes and die.

The wind was loud and strong. He stood in the graveyard after he had buried his sister, his beautiful sister, tender as a flower. She had left the world forever and ever. Yunus Khan began to cry as he recalled that day.

He held the little girl in his arms just as he had once held his sister. But where was that other Yunus Khan, who had butchered people with such ease for four days, had

killed them for his religious faith, had played Holi with blood? Where was he? Where?

Yunus Khan felt shaken, disturbed. He had stopped too long to question himself. He had to hurry, the girl was wounded! He patted her gently once more, looked at her kindly, almost with reverence, and then quickly started the truck. Suddenly conscious of his duty, he realised that he should have left much earlier. Perhaps, the girl could still be saved – her wounds could be treated and bandaged. He drove the truck fast, very fast. It sped through the night. He thought to himself, 'Why am I doing all this? For her alone? Thousands have been massacred. She may be a lot of trouble. Besides, I am fighting for the freedom of my country!'

Lahore was approaching. Railway tracks ran parallel to the road. Shahadra, and then the truck sped towards Lahore. Where should he take her? To Mayo Hospital or to Sir Gangaram? Why to Gangaram? Yunus Khan was startled. Was he going to return her to her people? No, no, he would look after her himself. The truck stopped in front of Mayo Hospital.

Soon after, Yunus Khan was heard pleading with the doctor, "Save her, do what you can to save her. Doctor, doctor, please ... "

"Yes, yes, we shall do our best to help her."

The child lay in the hospital. Yunus Khan went back to his duty. But he also looked after her, and did everything that was required. But he was anxious.

The streets of Lahore were burning. They were full of smoke. Groups of panic-stricken, frightened people passed through them under the protection of the army. But there were also soldiers who joined large gatherings of hooligans and laughed with them. Dead men lay piled everywhere like garbage. Bodies of naked women lay scattered in the deserted

streets. The silence of the city was broken by slogans – slogans which were screamed loudly.

But Yunus Khan, who had killed tirelessly till yesterday, was very calm. He had walked very briskly that evening. It seemed as if he wasn't going to a hospital, but was going home.

Why was he so concerned about an unknown child? She wasn't even a Muslim – she was a Hindu, a Hindu!

Her bed seemed to him to be far from the door, very far. He had to take long strides to reach it.

The girl lay on a metal bed. Her head was wrapped with white bandages. Her eyes were still shut as if she was afraid of looking at a dreadful scene. Her pretty and innocent face was marked with fear.

What could he say to her – How should he address her? "Nooran," he almost called out to her, but stopped. He stretched out his hand to touch her. His fingers gently caressed her head and his voice choked.

Suddenly the girl stirred. Still unconscious, she began to shout with fear, "Camp, camp, we have reached the camp. Run ... run ... faster ... "

"No, don't be afraid – open your eyes and look."

"Fire, fire ... they are shooting ... the soldiers ... "

When she saw him leaning over her, she screamed.

"Doctor, doctor, doctor, please save her."

The doctor, who had seen all this before, said, "She is afraid of you. That's because she is a kafir."

"Kafir? " The word echoed in his ears, "Kafir ... kafir ... why save her then? Kafir? No, I'll look after her. "

That is how they passed those nights of carnage. Yunus Khan continued to do his duty in the army, while the child lay in the hospital.

Then came a day when the child recovered. Yunus Khan went to the hospital to take her away.

The girl stared at him with her large, dark eyes. There was fear, hatred and suspicion in them.

When Yunus Khan touched her head, she trembled with fear. She thought those hands would strangle her. She shut her eyes in terror. She couldn't understand anything. "Where are they? Who is this Baluch? Oh what a dreadful night that was! Where was her brother?" With an awful start she remembered that her brother's head had been chopped off with a scythe!

Yunus Khan watched her for a while and then said softly, "You are well now. Shall we go home?"

The girl began to shake with fear and shouted, "No, no! Where is my home? You will kill me."

Yunus Khan wanted to believe that she was Nooran. But that girl wasn't Nooran. She was a stranger, who was mortally afraid of him.

The girl pleaded with him, "Don't take me to your house. Send me to the camp. They will kill me here, they will kill me ..."

Yunus Khan was forced to lower his eyes. He no longer felt like a brave, powerful and ruthless soldier. He felt miserable, helpless, weak.

He looked at her compassionately and wondered, 'Did any relative of hers survive? I will look after her.' He was overcome with a strange sense of pity.

He smiled and then touched her gently, "Come, don't be afraid – you are like my own ..."

Sitting next to Yunus Khan, the girl thought to herself that he would take her to a lonely spot and kill her, shoot her or stab her! She held his hand and pleaded, "Khan, don't kill me, please don't kill me — please!" Her face was pale with terror.

Yunus Khan said to her in a voice full of kindness, "Be patient, don't cry. I will look after you like my own sister. You will live with me."

"No!" the girl shouted with hatred in her voice and began to strike him with her fists. "You are a Muslim ... You'll kill me."

Suddenly she started screaming, "Where is my brother? Where is my sister? Where is my mother ...?"

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Translated by Alok Bhalla.