

BITTER HARVEST

When Qasim walked through the door, all he was conscious of was a burning pain in his thigh because of the embedded bullet. But when he saw the blood-soaked body of his wife lying in the courtyard, he forgot his pain. He wanted to grab his axe and rush out of the house, killing everyone who came in his path, smashing everything that caught his eye. Then he thought of his daughter, Sharifan.

‘Sharifan! Sharifan!’ he shouted.

The doors of the two rooms in the house were shut. Was she hiding behind one of them, he wondered. ‘Sharifan! Sharifan!’ he screamed. ‘This is me, your father.’ There was no answer. He pushed open the first door with both hands. What he saw was so horrifying that he almost fainted.

On the floor was the nearly naked body of a young girl, her small, upturned breasts pointing at the ceiling as she lay on her back. He wanted to scream but he couldn’t. He turned his face away and said in a soft, grief-stricken voice, ‘Sharifan.’ Then he picked up some clothes from the floor and threw them over her. He did not notice that they had missed their target by several feet.

As he ran out of the house, axe in hand, he was no longer conscious of the bullet in his thigh or the blood-soaked body of his wife, but only of Sharifan, the naked Sharifan lying dead in a heap on the floor of her room.

Axe in hand, he began to move like molten lava through the deserted streets of the city. He saw a Sikh in the main square, a big hulk of a man, but so ferocious and sudden was Qasim’s attack that the man fell to the ground like an uprooted tree, blood gushing out of his severed head.

Qasim could feel his own blood surging through his body, like boiling oil over which cold water is being sprinkled. He saw a

group of five or six men at the far end of the road and moved towards them like an arrow. 'Har Har Mahadev,' they shouted, obviously taking him for a fellow Hindu. 'Motherfuckers,' he screamed and rushed at them, swinging his axe wildly.

In a few seconds, three of them had fallen to the ground in a blood-smeared pile; the others had run away. Like a man demented, he kept hitting them, till he fell on top of one of the dead bodies himself. He wasn't sure if he had fallen or been overpowered. He lay there waiting for the blow to come, but nothing happened. After a few minutes, he slowly opened his eyes. There was no one on the road, just three dead men among whom he lay.

He almost felt disappointed that he had not been killed, but then he remembered Sharifan's naked body, an image that seared his eyes like molten lead. He picked up his axe and was soon running through the streets, shouting obscenities.

The city was deserted. He turned randomly into a small side street, but was soon out of there when he realized that it was a Muslim neighbourhood. So far he had been hurling abuse at the mothers and sisters of his enemies; now he began to abuse their daughters.

He came to a stop in front of a small house. On the wooden door was a sign in Hindi. Qasim began to swing his axe at it and in a few minutes he had smashed the wood into a pulp. 'Come out, you bastards, come out!' he screamed as he went in.

One of the doors in the house creaked on its hinges and opened slowly to reveal a young girl. 'Who are you?' he asked. 'I am a Hindu,' she replied, running her tongue over her dry lips. She could not have been more than fourteen or fifteen.

Qasim threw away the axe and pounced on her like a wild beast, throwing her to the ground. Then he began to tear at her clothes and for half an hour he ravaged her like an animal gone berserk. There was no resistance; she had fainted.

When he finished, he realized that he was clutching her throat with both hands, his nails embedded into her soft skin. He released her with a violent jerk.

He closed his eyes and saw an image of his daughter, lying

dead on the floor, her small breasts pointing upwards. He broke into an icy sweat.

Through the smashed street door, a man ran into the house, a sword in his hand. He found Qasim squatting on the floor, trying to spread a blanket over someone lying there.

'Who are you?' the stranger roared.

Qasim turned his face towards him.

'Qasim!' the man screamed in disbelief.

Qasim blinked his eyes; his face wore a blank expression. He couldn't even see properly.

'What are you doing in my house?' the man shouted.

With a trembling finger, Qasim pointed to the blanket-covered heap on the floor. 'Sharifan,' he said in a hollow voice.

The other man pulled off the blanket. The sword fell from his hand; then he staggered out of the house wailing, 'Bimla, my daughter, Bimla.'