

Amavasya

Jyotika Prasad

“*N*isha Mehra”

She saw the look on the face of the other participants as she introduced herself. The look that said “What an apt name!”- with a twisted smile. She felt the irony- the topic of the elocution competition was Apartheid- something which had been legally abolished in South Africa, but was still prevalent in eastern Punjab. But she knew that the contempt would change to wonder once she bagged the first place.

Her grandmother had chosen her name. “See the night, *bitiya* – tranquil and beautiful,” her grandmother had told her on the terrace one night. “No one and nothing can escape from its control. You are like it - full of power and beauty.” Power she knew she had. Academics, athletics, debating, drama and dance- she was proficient in all of them. But beauty? Blunt features, thick lips and above all, a complexion that was as dark as the night after which she had been named. In Punjab, where a girl’s being fair was almost as necessary as her having two ears or a nose, it was hard for a dark girl to gain popularity or acceptance. People shot taunts at you that stung like hot needles poked into your flesh. You needed confidence that was as unshakable as the mighty Himalayas to be able to stand through it all, and not lose faith in yourself. Fortunately having a mother who stood by her like a rock had given Nisha plenty of it.

She heard the name of the next speaker being announced-“Rohit Chawla”. If there was one person whom Nisha detested with her 13-year-old heart, it was Rohit Chawla. The tall, fair boy never missed an opportunity to pick on her. It was by his grace that half the children in the class called her “Amavasya”, meaning ‘no moon.’ Rohit had been the unparalleled crown prince of the class before she arrived. Her arrival, however, shook him. In everything that Rohit was good at; Nisha was better. His frustration nurtured jealousy. Desperate to find something he could pull her about, he began picking on her colour.

Rohit was a good speaker, and very soon he had the audience enraptured with his violent condemnation of Apartheid. Nisha heard him bang on the podium and forcefully drive in his points. Her lips curved in a contemptuous smile. “Liar”, she thought as she recalled the words he had chosen to insult her just the morning of the competition, “Amavasya! You might have won over me last time, but this time I shall defeat the night.”



mirror, mirror on our world...



As the children proceeded to the canteen for refreshments after the competition, Smriti turned to Nisha.

“Nisha, what about that scientist who's coming to give the lecture? Who's going to receive them at the station? They'll be sending you, right?”

“Have you flipped a lid, Smriti?”, Rohit interrupted. “The Principal doesn't want to scare those people off! If our dear old Amavasya goes, those people will jump back into the train and return to Delhi.” The whole group burst into those familiar sounds of insult. But it took more than that to shake Nisha Mehra.

“Come on now, Rohit!” she shot back “it's a case of sour grapes. Don't be so sour about not being chosen. After all, someday, if I leave school, they'll choose you!” With that, and a haughty toss of her head, she walked off.

Just as she reached her classroom, she heard the principal's deep voice over the announcing system, declaring the results of the elocution competition. Her heartbeat intensified as the third place was announced.

“The second place”, he continued, “has been secured by Rohit Chawla. And the first goes to Nisha Mehra!”

Cheers and thunderous clapping seemed to fill the corridor, and Nisha found herself once again as the cynosure of attraction. Suddenly, the forlorn face of Rohit sprung up from the crowd and she walked over to him. “Congrats, Rohit”, she shot the first arrow, “you got second. Again”. The *coup de grace* left him burning.



“Nisha!” she heard her class teacher call her. She turned around, expecting another shower of “Congratulations!” and “Well Done!”. What she got, however, was something much different.

“Er..., well, remember the scientist, Dr. Ramamurthy, whom you were supposed to receive?”

“Supposed?” she thought, as her heart went cold.

“Well, dear, don't be disappointed, but the Principal wants to send Rohit.”

She felt as though someone had slapped her across her face. “But ma'am, why?” she said. Maybe something was wrong. Maybe her teacher didn't mean it the way it sounded.



“You see, Nisha, you are definitely smart. You have good manners, but...”
 “I understand, ma’am”

She walked away with a heavy heart. Sure she understood! Ever since she had come to Punjab, that ‘but’ had characterized her life, followed her like an incessant shadow. She was brilliant and she knew it, but... but she was dark.

She reached home crestfallen. “First again, dear?” Wiping the beads of sweat on her brow with the *pallu* of her sari, her mother entered the room. One look at her daughter’s face was sufficient to tell her that things had not gone well for Nisha. With that silent understanding that is so typical of mothers, she reached over and embraced her daughter. There is this strange understanding that exists between a mother and her child; an understanding even God finds difficult to fathom and maybe even He admires.

“Nisha, age will uncrown all those beauty queens of your school someday. But the talents God has given you will withstand the onslaught of time. They might earn admiration, but you, my dear, will command respect. They are so blinded by the shine of polished copper that they fail to admire the gold. What they do not know is that someday this polish will wear off, but gold will always be precious.”

Nisha raised her head to look at the face that had always been there for her like a pillar of strength. What others said did not matter- she had her mummy with her. “You know what, mummy”, she said with a smile. “I haven’t yet told you what the problem is.” “You don’t need to, sweetheart, mummy always knows! Now have something and run off to play”, she replied.

The sun went down as Nisha entered the living room after her game. Familiar paper bags greeted her. “Mummy has been shopping again! Wonder what she’s got for me?” She eagerly opened the little packet that she knew was for her. Out came a bar of chocolate and a brand new Barbie doll. Then something fell out of the packet, something that she had never imagined would be a part of it. She stormed out of the living room and threw the *pink tube of fairness cream* as far as she could.

Life had been very unfair to her. “Unfair”. The irony was striking. She felt betrayed. For the first time in her life, the night did not seem all that powerful. She did not know what to do now.

It was *Amavasya* indeed.



mirror, mirror on our world...

