



Tracing the loneliness and depression in Ramcharan Harshana's "A Neighbour in America"

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The paper traces an Indian mother's feeling of loneliness in a host land as depicted in the short story, "A Neighbour in America" by Ramcharan Harshana. The story explores the dream of an Indian mother living peacefully with his son in America, and her bizarre experience as a first timer in the New World.

Her only son Binny had been working in Infosys in Bangalore. Then he got a chance to work in a famous IT company in the USA. There he got married to an Indian girl. The mother was very much pleased talking to his son through video call. Binny talked at length about life in America. As a single parent, the mother had an ardent desire to stay with his son and daughter in law. But she couldn't reveal her wish to her son. As a pleasant surprise, Binny sent her all the papers related to passport visa and even air tickets to fly to America.

Her happiness knew no bounds when she was received by her son with his wife at the airport in New York. It took three hours to reach Binny's residence, Mountain lakes, a suburb in New Jersey. They went to his residential flat on the fifth floor by an elevator. At first, the mother was amazed by the rich ambience of his residential area with garden, swimming pool and its beautiful surrounding. When she eagerly asked about the neighbours, he laughed. "There is nothing here like neighbours, Mom. This is not India. Here all residents are tenants only. They come and go at a regular interval". (Harshana Ramcharan, 105) These words indirectly suggest the plight of Indian employees in foreign IT companies as they have to face layoffs often. Thousands of Indian IT Professionals in the U.S. who lost their jobs due to the series of recent lay-offs at companies such as Google, Microsoft and Amazon are now struggling to find new employment within the stipulated period under their work visas to stay in the country. (the hinhu.com, January 23, 2023)

Before leaving to work, Binny gave his mother all necessary instructions. He instructed her to dial 500 if there would be an emergency such as a fire or a thief breaking into the house. She was buzzed by the thought

that she should not shout or get the help of the neighbour. Maintaining distance from the neighbours was utterly an alien concept for her.

The generation gap between a mother and her son is evident in many occasions. The mother's poignant feelings and emotions can't be fully understood by her son. It was easy for her son to get settled in a foreign land. He said, "Earn dollars, spend dollars, live happily" is the motto with all Americans. He accustomed himself to the lifestyle of Americans so that he could live contentedly in the world of progress and prosperity. (Harshana Ramcharan 104) But it is a herculean task for the mother to assimilate herself to the American life.

Binny loved and married a girl of his choice. He didn't think of getting her mother's consent for his marriage. He casually introduced his wife to her mother at the airport. "Mom, she is Kalpana. Kalpana Nair. Working with me in the same IT company". (Harshana Ramcharan 104) The mother had some kind of relief, that her son didn't choose an American girl as his life partner but married a girl belonging to Kunnur of South India.

The mother couldn't digest the fact that she had to spend eight to ten hours lonely every day. Both her son and daughter in law were working and working for long hours. Consequently she was stressed out and isolated. She had to be alert and cautious every minute in the foreign land. She must be mindful of the instructions and warnings given by her son. If her husband were alive, perhaps her situation would have been different. She sat alone for hours thinking the sort of life people were leading in America as Sumitha felt in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "Clothes".

I feel caught in a world where everything is frozen in place, like a scene inside a glass paperweight. It is a world so small that if I were to stretch out my arms, I would touch its cold unyielding edges. I stand inside the glass world, watching helplessly as America rushes by, wanting to scream. (jerrywbrown.com)

On the very first day of her arrival, Binny showed his mother all the rooms in his flat and said happily that this was his house and there were five rooms, and she can stay in any one of these rooms except his wife's and his room. And he strictly warned her not to talk to the neighbours. He permitted her to go the garden at evening time.

This is America, Mom. You can't rely upon your neighbour here. Everybody here is busy minding his own business. Nobody's free here as we find our neighbours in India. Don't fall into conversation with anybody and ask questions about the personal matters. (Harshana Ramcharan 105)

He tried to make her understand the term 'neighbour' had a different connotation in the host land. Though Binny worried about the safety of her mother in his absence, he was more concerned with the idea, 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do'. According to a modern psychiatrist, parents struggle with loneliness syndrome, and they are grappling with anxiety and depression because of loneliness. (m.timesofindia.com)

Once when she came out of the flat, she was greeted by an elderly couple. Mindful of the son's advice, she couldn't respond to them. She had difficulties in adapting herself to a new environment. After that she came

to know they were Edmund Burkley and his wife and she thought they must have been offended by her behaviour. Next day, she met the couple again, and invited them for dinner. First, they refused, then they agreed to come for dinner.

But her son was irritated. He didn't like the idea of honouring the neighbour with the dinner. But the mother tried to mingle with the neighbour. After much hesitation, he gave a green signal to invite them. She prepared Indian dishes and the Edmonds had dinner with them. She Indianized their names by calling them 'Edmondji'. In order to come over the depression caused by her loneliness, she visited their door. However, she was disappointed as her neighbours had not reciprocated for her genuine feelings as she expected. She was badly in need of the company of people with whom she can exchange her love and care, partake in their good and bad time and at the same time hate and quarrel with them. She could not endure the indifferent attitude of the people nearby.

When Binny's family was shifting their residence, the Edmonds never showed even a slight concern at their departure. It must have been humiliating and hurting to the mother. She understood the temperament of the people who never feel sorry for their neighbour's leaving. The mother in this story was not given a name emphasising she was a typical Indian mother who cares for her own family and neighbours.

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