

## GULF OF MATURESCENCE: SIBLING RIVALRY IN AMY TAN'S *THE HUNDRED SECRET SENSES*

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**Abstract:** Sibling sisters always develop a sense of jealousy for one or the other reasons between them. Amy Tan has substantiated the sisterhood in her novels. Sibling rivalry commences in childhood and continues into adulthood, but in adulthood, the emotional bonding between the siblings stabilizes, and their relationship dramatically changes over the years. The important factor that affects the sibling relationship is age. Siblings, irrespective of their age, whether children or adolescents, tend to show their aggressive qualities due to their envy.

**Keywords:** Amy Tan, sibling, age, rivalry, aggressiveness, adulthood.

### INTRODUCTION

Sibling relationships are “fascinating, dynamic, and unique relationship[s]” (East 43) and are the most long-term relationships between those who share the same parents, and family. They serve as bonds for individual development. They unite the intricacies of attachments between the siblings. Nevertheless, in this type of relationship, sibling rivalry is a common occurrence. It is generally influenced by various factors like parental treatment, birth order, age, and other social issues.

### SIBLING RIVALRY

Sibling rivalry commences in childhood and continues into adulthood, but in adulthood, the emotional bonding between the siblings stabilizes, and their relationship dramatically changes over the years. Tan depicts the sibling rivalry, from the stage of innocence to the mature self-identity. Instances such as parental illness or in-law relationships may bring the siblings closer. “There is a plus/minus component to sibling relationships - a strong attachment to siblings can sustain a person and lead to a good sense of self throughout life or, conversely, can hinder individualization and growth. Competitions can be healthy and foster maturity, or it can be debilitating and foster hostility” (Greif 6).

Amy Tan, in her novels *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*, emphasizes the significance of the ethnic mother-daughter relationship, but in the novel *The Hundred Secret Senses*, she explores sisterhood through ethnic perception and identity. In the light of sisterhood identity, Tan discusses not only the biological bonding between the sisters, but also their emotional and spiritual bond. She analyses the similarity and difference that exist between two half-sisters in *The Hundred Secret Senses*. Tan's depiction of sisterhood mainly springs from

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the sympathetic reality that there is an equal propensity for helping in sisterhood relationships in difficult situations. “‘For a woman the sister is the other’, who is at the same time most like herself. ‘She is of the same gender and generation’, has the same parents and ‘was exposed to the same values, assumptions,’ and ‘patterns of interactions’” (Downing 11). Besides, this sibling relationship at times transforms into misconception or disloyalty because of its social impact; however, Tan exquisitely narrates how the siblings’ self-identify reconstruct their relationship.

In this way, Tan transforms her female characters from a delicate and weak-minded mentality to a strong willed individual steadfastness. Therefore, in this paper, Tan portrays sibling relationships in which the birth order of siblings and issues related to the influence of parenting are analyzed. Bedford analyses sibling relationship thus:

The sibling relationship has features not shared by most friendship or intergenerational family ties. One feature is the remarkable persistence of the sibling tie; it is the longest enduring human bond, spanning most of the life of each member. Within the family of orientation, the sibling is the most egalitarian relationship, and except for very old friends, it is the only peer like relationship with a shared past. A near-universal “dormant” characteristic is that siblings can be turned to in times of crisis. Another feature is that contact with siblings will almost always be maintained least. (124)

### **BIRTH ORDER OF SIBLINGS**

The important factor that affects the sibling relationship is age. Siblings, irrespective of their age, whether children or adolescents, tend to show their aggressive qualities due to their envy. When they become adults, siblings become friendlier. There are many contradictory results, depending on siblings’ relationship, quality and age gap. Siblings with an age difference of more than two years, experience more competition and more stressful kinship. In the words of Sulloway, “an age gap of 2 to 4 years produces the largest birth-order effects” (172). In addition, Milevsky reveals that age difference is a vital element of understanding the sibling relationships. Approximately half of the participants believe that age differences have negative consequences on sibling relationships; while the other half believe that the differences improve the relationship (Milevsky 143). Tan’s depiction of the sibling relationship between stepsisters is pervaded with numerous issues and it is not quite the same as the relationship between the full sisters. When the sisters come from two different races, it is likely that the relationship will turn out to be much more strained. Be that as it may, in Amy Tan’s novel *The Hundred Secret Senses*, there is total affability between the two sisters.

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Olivia Bishop, the narrator, is the child of an American mother and a Chinese father. When Olivia is four years old, her father dies, revealing that she has a sister named Kwan in China. Olivia does not want to be with her step-sister Kwan, but events force them together, and the sisters share many things. Tan tries to bring out the cultural issues and language problems that exist between Olivia and Kwan.

Tan explains how Olivia tries to be different from Kwan and tries to grab attention from her mother. Olivia is “priggish, cynical and wholly American in her perspective” (Messud Web). She is a very small girl. But she tries to take care of herself and wants to prove to her mother that she has become responsible and does not need a step-sister like Kwan. This kind of sibling deidentification establishes more of the uniqueness and identity of the sibling within the family.

The unraveling relationship between Olivia and Kwan shows that Olivia’s aversion toward her sister originates from their racial and cultural differences instead of competition for parental care. Olivia attempts to segregate herself from her half-sister Kwan. In the words of Olivia, “Actually, Kwan is my half-sister, but I’m not supposed to mention that publicly. That would be an insult, as if she deserved only fifty percent of the love from our family. But just to set the genetic record straight, Kwan and I share a father, only that” (HSS 3). At the end of the day, the sisterhood between Olivia and Kwan is not only a biological bond, but also culturally defined. Olivia, a professional photographer, is an “American mixed grill, a bit of everything white, fatty, and fried” (HSS 3). As a teen, Olivia was embarrassed by Kwan, who on her arrival in the United States was unlike anyone Olivia has ever encountered. Kwan was too Chinese, too alien, too un-American in her behavior. Kwan presents the racial and cultural heritage that Olivia denies; Kwan’s Chinese identity and her decision to follow her traditional Chinese ethnicity humiliate Olivia, who wants to identify herself with Western culture. Hence, Kwan is a constant source of disdain and humiliation to Olivia. Tan depicts an eighteen-year-old Kwan as “a strange old lady, short and chubby” (HSS 10). She is cumbersome and hardly able to communicate in English. With her yin eyes, she acquaints Olivia with the world of ghosts. Her conviction that she can talk with spirits is another source of mortification for Olivia. All through her childhood, Olivia refuses to play with Kwan, and continually shouts at Kwan that she is humiliating her. Olivia is always embarrassed because of Kwan’s behavior.

In one such instance, when Olivia, Kevin, Tommy, and Kwan are sitting on the lawn, Kevin’s friends mischievously turn on the sprinkler system. Olivia and both her brothers run away from the lawn, but Kwan is so dumb that she thinks that many springs have erupted out of earth all at once, and keeps standing there. Seeing this act, Kevin’s friends start teasing not only Kwan, but also Olivia, asking, “Hey, Olivia, does that mean you’re a dumb Chink too?” Hearing this, Olivia starts yelling in frustration, “She’s not my sister! I hate her! I wish she’d go back to China!” (HSS

10). This emphasizes the distinction between the two sisters—West and East. A kind of cultural diversity has been maintained throughout. “Despite all this, Kwan remains fiercely loyal to her recalcitrant sister” (Messud Web).

With regard to this identity gap between the step sisters, Melanie Mauthner rightly reveals “the intricate dynamics of power and care at play in sister relationships. Psychoanalysts have theorized that the inherent coexistence of similarity and difference in sibling relationships [is] an important aspect of the formation of identity in psychic life” (qtd. in Edwards:5). The sisterly relationship appears to follow the pattern of extremity. At the outset, the sisters seem to tackle inverse roles. Kwan explains Eastern culture to Olivia. She exemplifies the differences between East and West, and acts as a channel for cultural differences, giving access to the riddles of Chinese culture. Olivia, with the exception of her Asian identity, is all-American. To keep up her American character, she denies the closeness that Kwan wishes to set up and endeavors to set limits between herself and Kwan. As Helga G. Braunbeck clarifies, “Polarity is caused not only by the need for differentiation from the other who is at the same time so much like the self, but also by the need to find one’s own field of identity” (159). Apart from the cultural hindrance between the step-sisters, it is actually the social issues that create sibling rivalry between Olivia and Kwan. Social factors, such as friends’ mocking and family members’ ill-treatment of the siblings, evoke serious sibling rivalry issues. Tan also presents all these issues in her novels. According to Milevsky’s consideration, the three major factors that affect the sibling rivalry are birth order, age, and the relationships between the parents and the children. The birth order of siblings plays a vital role in elucidating the aggressive nature of the siblings. Tan illustrated this role through Peanut in *The Kitchen God’s Wife* and Olivia in *The Hundred Secret Senses*. Since they were the younger siblings, they tried to dominate the elder siblings and tried to compensate for their birth order. As the younger siblings, they tried to compete with the firstborns to get more parental care.

Kwan, being the elder sister, tells Olivia about her yin eyes, and her ability to see all the dead people. Therefore, Olivia’s childhood is molded profoundly by her sister and her stories. After quite a while, in their bedroom, Kwan endeavors to tell Olivia about her story of rebirth to build up her relationship with Olivia. Kwan makes Olivia believe that in a previous life, Kwan was Nunumu, a very good friend of an American, Miss Nelly Banner. Once, when Miss Banner was drowning in a river, it was Nunumu who saved Miss Banner’s life. Also, Kwan tells Olivia that due to the rescue, Nunumu’s and Miss Banner’s lives “flowed together in that river, and became as tangled and twisted as a drowned woman’s hair” (HSS 42). Ever since childhood, Kwan has trained Olivia to recollect her stories of friendship and trustworthiness, and the noteworthy confession that she was Miss Banner. Gradually, Olivia also starts to believe in *The Hundred Secret Senses* with which one chats with apparitions and recovers “dreams as other lives, other selves.” Looking back at her

childhood, Olivia says, “She had planted her imagination into mine. Her ghosts refused to be evicted from my dreams” (HSS 32).

Kwan’s ghost-filled dreams attack Olivia’s mind in the long run. She can no longer recognize the boundaries between her own fantasies and the scenes in Kwan’s stories. She asks, “So which part was her dream, which part was mine? Where did they intersect?” (HSS 32). Olivia remembers that her sister’s speech influences her subconscious brain; however, she maintains a strategic distance from it. “Olivia finds that she has inadvertently absorbed much about Chinese superstitions, spirits, and reincarnation. At some subconscious level, she recognizes her sister’s influence but avoids it” (Yu 150). Although Olivia never believes in all those yin stories, she hates Kwan for telling them to her. Since, Kwan is the elder sister, Olivia is forced to stay in the same chamber, and so Olivia has to listen to all stories that Kwan tells her. Earlier, Olivia had struggled with the stories and tried to distance herself from Kwan. In her reluctance she narrates that “[f]or most of my childhood, I had to struggle not to see the world the way Kwan described it” (HSS 43). But later, as days progress, Olivia starts to learn the Chinese language through the influence of Kwan. During the night time, Kwan tells Olivia all her ghost stories in Chinese, and so Olivia gradually learns it, “That’s how I became the only one in my family who learned Chinese. Kwan infected me with it. I absorbed her language through my pores while I was sleeping. She pushed her Chinese secrets into my brain and changed how I thought about the world” (HSS 11). Words such as “pushed” and “infected” describe Olivia feelings towards the negative aspects of learning Chinese language. As Kwan continues to tell her ghost stories to Olivia, Olivia gets scared and tells her mother about Kwan’s yin eyes. Olivia’s mother takes Kwan to a psychiatrist, and she is given shock treatments (HSS 11). These are the birth order issues confronted by Olivia and Kwan. Olivia’s conflicted involvement with her sister proceeds into adulthood. Despite the fact that Olivia hates and even fears her sister, she remembers her own shamefulness and selfishness despite all Kwan has done for her.

The sibling relationship between Kwan and Olivia diversifies into two distinct cultures. Olivia is attracted towards Western culture, while Kwan is completely Chinese in identity. Olivia teaches Kwan English just to avoid her getting humiliated by her friends. In one instance, when Olivia is seven years old, she tricks Kwan into believing that the word for pears is “‘barf.’ ... She stumble[d] over this new sound—‘bar-a-fa, bar-a-fa’—before she said, ‘Wah! What a clumsy word for such a delicate taste’” (HSS 11). In another incident, when Olivia is twelve years old, she gives Kwan an Ouija board as a Christmas gift and she tells Kwan that she can use it to get the American ghosts to spell English words. Nevertheless, Kwan does not take the humiliation from Olivia personally, but she thanks Olivia for the gift. Olivia gets irritated by Kwan’s acceptance and shouts, “Stop acting so retarded.” (HSS 11). In this case, Olivia wants to irritate Kwan, but it is she who gets annoyed.

“For Olivia, speaking Chinese is contagious and an act to be ashamed of. We can see the imbalance and inequality between the two languages and cultures. Chinese and anything related to it would be considered awkward and embarrassing” (Lee 121).

Kwan’s love toward her kin knows no limits. Olivia begins to look all starry eyed at Simon Bishop, who was once infatuated with Elza. Now Olivia looks for assistance from Kwan to induce Simon to wed her. So Kwan advises Simon to marry Olivia before it is too late, otherwise he will feel sorry later. Kwan influences him to wed Olivia by highlighting Olivia’s numerous great characteristics. “She went on and on about how honest and sincere I was, how kind, and loyal, how smart” (HSS 106). Olivia and Simon get married, yet soon get isolated. Kwan, out of her nurturing love towards Olivia, takes on a mission to unite them, and tries to satisfy her sister’s decision to get Simon back in her life. Therefore, Kwan recommends that Simon and Olivia should take a trip to China. Simon agrees with the idea of Kwan. The real reason for the China trek is to show Olivia and Kwan’s association with the yin world. Kwan needs to take this chance to patch up Olivia’s broken relationship with Simon. Still, Kwan remains completely faithful to her unmanageable sister. She is determined to reconcile Olivia with her estranged spouse, Simon, and to attract the pair to China, to her home town of Changmian. Whatever it may be, her primary objective is a profound one: to urge her sister to recognize the truth of the world of yin and the reality of resurrection. The novel also includes a subplot, Kwan’s account of her destiny in a previous life and Kwan’s attempt to ensure that Olivia knows about her real Chinese identity.

Siblings usually have hard-nosed relationships when they are children. However, as they become adults, they try to become good friends and minimize their fighting and rivalry. Amy Tan has taken her characters from the childhood sibling stage of enmity and jealousy to the adulthood stage of amity. Characters such as Peanut and Olivia take advantage of their elder sisters Weili and Kwan respectively. The younger ones fight with their elder sisters during their childhoods and, as they become adults, they realize the importance of their elder sisters. Therefore, the delicacy of the childhood rivalry stage is normal for all the siblings, but Tan identifies how that rivalry between the siblings develops and how they sustain healthy relationship.

Childhood rivalry is a subtle matter that can corrupt the sibling relationship, as the rival child may get angry with the other. Parents sometimes contribute to the rivalry due to their partiality. Enmity might occur due to different incidents. This kind of sibling rivalry brings frustration to both parents and children. In short, sibling rivalry is when one of the siblings competes with the other for their parents’ love and attention. Tan, however, does not portray the frustration among the parents over the sibling rivalry. She explores the causes for the sibling rivalries, namely jealousy, fighting, humiliation of siblings, parental favoritism and so on. In *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, she describes jealousy, parental favoritism, and fighting between Peanut and

Weili, which pave the way for their rivalry. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Tan draws the attention of readers towards Olivia and Kwan through the humiliation of Kwan's ethnicity and idleness, which affect Olivia indirectly.

## CONCLUSION

No other bond is stronger than the sister relationship. The chief cause for the kinship in the sisterhood is that, they are psychologically linked by powerful, unrestrained positive and negative feelings, and at times conflicting in nature. The sisters live in the same house with their parents, spend most of their times with their siblings. Hence it is obvious that they know everything about each other very much. The only thing that develops the differences between them is their age that frequently creates the issues of authority and also envy and competition. But the intimacy of the siblings after they have grown up continues till their death.

The sibling relationship is likely to last longer than any other relationships. The main reason for the bond is that they are emotionally connected by strong, uninhibited emotions of a positive, negative and sometimes ambivalent quality. The intimacy in sibling relationship makes the youngsters spend large amount of time together and they know each other. Though they have long history of conflicts, they know the value of each other. Mainly, the age difference often makes the issues of authority and dominance envy and enmity. Siblings almost always live together in a parental house. Hence the intimacy continues.

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