ABSTRACT

Amy Tan’s third novel, The Hundred Secret Senses revolves around the lives of two half-sisters fated to be born and live apart in two different nations divided by a range of cultural dissimilarities. They happen to come together and coexist in the same family in a sudden turn of events. This paper is an attempt to analyze their relationship from the de-identification and birth order perspectives. The whole story is a package of episodes that display an intimacy existing between these siblings, their cultural variations notwithstanding. So, the relationship between the two siblings offers enough scope for such an analysis. The various incidents they both pass through mirror the real life happenings in many Asian-American families today. It spreads out a base for future studies of sibling relationship that are brought up in places that are distinctly diverse in intellectual, emotional and cultural environments.

Keywords: Sisterhood; Rivalry; Amy Tan; Hundred Secret Senses; Deidentification

INTRODUCTION

The Hundred Secret Senses by Amy Tan, the Chinese-American writer, is yet another masterpiece that depicts the unusual kind of relationship existing between two half-sisters who were born in two different countries which are miles apart both geographically and culturally. The birth place of the elder sibling is China and that of the younger one is America. Amy Tan has, through this novel, has proved that she is a writer blessed with a special skill in portraying the relationship between the characters in Chinese American families. The Hundred Secret Senses right from the first meeting between the siblings in the United States till the end of their separation in China, the novel keeps the readers attentively engaged. Thanks to the author’s unique techniques in presenting the incidents involving the siblings. The many-layered narrative style adopted by the main Character Olivia, the U.S born sibling and the multiple settings employed in the novel that present a picturesque view of the places and the special characters occupying the scenes helps in rendering the novel a unique one and which makes it extra impressive. The narrative of her experience with persons in the ghost world by Kwan and her sister’s emotional and intelligent responses to the narratives, form the two powerful elements in the relationship between the siblings. Their transition from just the normal sisterhood status to the mother-daughter ennoblement drags the readers onto the sentimental plane right at the beginning itself. The title itself sparks a curiosity about the content of the novel. Several aspects that contribute to the sentimental value of the novel have been deftly handled by the author. That the novel,
The Hundred Secret Senses is yet another delectable feast, for the novel enthusiasts is not just a statement of praise, but an expression of its value.

**OBJECTIVE**

The Objective of the study is Siblings Rivalry in Amy Tan the Hundred Secret Senses, using Siblings Deidentification theory

**The Deidentification phenomenon in Sibling Relationship**

“‘Sisterhood is powerful’. Sisterhood has traditionally acted as a powerful emotional bond. … sisterly relations have been a means for providing comfort, and, most important, empowerment in the practical realm of social relations” (Yu 143). Olivia, the principal character and chief narrator in the novel begins the story by expressing her apathy towards her half-sister even before she meets her. She does not relish the idea that she is going to have a new sister. Olivia is just 6-years old when her half-sister arrives in her life. Though Kwan is a much older than her, she considers Kwan as an intruder in her privileged status of being the only daughter in the family. “I was scared of Kwan before I ever met her” (HSS 5).

Olivia and Kwan's relationship originates when their father expires. Kwan is sent to live with Olivia’s family. Olivia is often felt embarrassed by Kwan as she is unaccustomed with American customs. Olivia is harassed by peers for having a ‘retarded’ sister. Kwan unable to pronounce her sister's name correctly, calls her as ‘Libby-ah’ (HSS 1). Olivia, getting upset with her half-sister’s clumsy behavior, lets out her feelings to her brother’s friend in anger-filled words thus: She’s not my sister! I hate her! I wish she'd go back to China.”(HSS 12).She often gets annoyed by the ghost story narration of Kwan and her bragging that she has ‘Yin Eyes’. Unable to tolerate Kwan’s repeated narrations of her meetings with the dead people and her conversations with them, she informs her mother about the behavior of Kwan. She "believes she has yin eyes," Olivia tells us through her narration. "She sees those who have died and now dwells in the World of Yin."(HSS 3). She also holds conversations with these ghosts, says Olivia.

Olivia’s complaint about Kwan to her mother lands her in an institution treating mental disorders. She does this although Kwan had requested her not to reveal the secret to anyone. At the hospital, Kwan undergoes lots of sufferings under the pretext of treatment. But, Kwan neither stops telling ghost stories nor does she flinch in her motherly love towards Olivia. Later on Olivia regrets her betrayal of her sister….“That I betrayed her and that’s what made her insane” (HSS 17).

When it comes to weighing sibling relationship with Siblings Deidentification theories, Avidan Milevsky provides a foundational text for a growing area of study in his book, Sibling Relationships in Childhood and Adolescence: Predictors and Outcome. He cites several studies and the data arrived therein in support of his statements about the exchange of feelings between the siblings in families of several structural variations. While examining such verbal expressions Milevsky takes into account various factors such as age of the siblings, their birth order and family size. He particularly supplies crucial perspective on "Deidentification,” or conscious differentiation, in which parents inspire different life paths to minimize sibling comparison and competition. In the absence of any parental intervention in shaping the sibling relationship in The Hundred Secret Senses, we have to view the deidentification in the relationship of Kwan and Olivia as an occurrence without any outside influence.

Olivia, with a view to avoiding unnecessary conflict with her sister, keeps her identity intact. ‘In dyads in which younger siblings tried to be different from their older siblings, ….younger siblings deidentify with older siblings because these siblings treat them badly, a process that is much different than that invoked by deidentification theory’ (Milevsky 97).Kwan relates to Olivia through telling her Chinese tales and superstitions. But her narration about her connection with ghost world and her experiences with the ghosts often frightens Olivia. She claims she has ‘yin eyes and she strongly believes in what she says. She recalls her past life and describes many an event in her past life with perfect clarity that any one hearing it cannot reject it as false. The only advantage for Olivia from hearing the stories is,
she is able to learn Chinese language unknowingly from her sister’s descriptions. And both the sisters develop a third identity for themselves through such interactions and the identity carries elements of both Asian and American characteristics.

Olivia’s judgment about her sister oscillates between anger and compassion depending upon how she gets affected by the words and actions of Kwan on a particular occasion. This is also because Olivia is fully an American girl, unable to assimilate her sister’s behavior from the point of view of a Chinese. Once she says, “she is like an orphan cat, kneading on my heart’. On another occasion, she feels sorry for her by saying, “I have done nothing to endear myself to her…I can’t remember how many times I’ve lied to get out of seeing her.”(HSS 12). Olivia’s mother, Louise Ken field fails to show the required affection towards her own daughter. Olivia is able to receive such motherly affection from Kwan. So the relationship between Kwan and Olivia gets thickened in spite of all the shortcomings Olivia finds in her sister. Thus the home environment with Olivia’s mother shirking her duties and responsibilities as a mother contributes to the development of the sisterly relationship between Kwan and Olivia into a mother-daughter bond.“Future work should examine how other family processes, such as home environment and parenting practices, interact with the sibling deidentification dynamics”(Milevsky 101).

Both the parents of Kwan are of Chinese origin. So it is no wonder that Kwan inherits pure Chinese characteristics from her parents. Normally Chinese mothers are overly involved in their daughters, a trait that can’t be seen among the American women. These inborn qualities of Kwan showing selfless affection towards her sister coupled with her innocence and her obsession to what she believes as true, all these add to the thickening of the bond that develops in Olivia towards her sister. Olivia is neither fully American nor a Chinese. Her characteristics are the mixed outcome of her American mother and Chinese father. Normally Americans are self-reliant, independent in whatever they do. Olivia, inheriting both American and Chinese values in her gene, often finds herself vacillating between being an American woman and a Chinese. This vacillation reflects on her approaches towards her half-sister.

However, like many acculturated daughters, Olivia, whose father is a Chinese, identifies with all these factors deserve consideration while assessing the deidentification phenomenon in the sibling relationship The Hundred Secret Senses.

**Birth Order Theories Influencing the Sibling Relationship**

The relationship between half-sisters is infested with many problems different from the ones between the full sisters. When the sisters are from two different races, there is likelihood of the relationship becoming even more strained. But in Amy Tan’s novel, ‘Hundred Secret Senses’ there is absolute cordiality between the two sisters.

Kwan’s affection toward her sibling knows no boundaries. Olivia falls in love with Simon Bishop, who was once in love with Elza. Elza died at her young age. Olivia seeks help from Kwan to persuade Simon to marry her. So Kwan tells Simon to marry Olivia before it is too late, or else he would feel sorry later on. She persuades him to marry her by emphasizing many good qualities of her sister. “…She went on and on about how honest and sincere I was, how kind, and loyal, how smart.” (HSS 62). Olivia and Simon get married but got separated soon. Kwan, out of her motherly affection towards Olivia, takes it upon a mission to unite them and makes every possible effort towards fulfilling her sibling’s desire to get back Simon in her life. Jing comments that “…a trusted female friend is where they can find true peace of mind and an extended form of maternal love during crisis in life. While sisterhood…a bond with women suffering from the turmoil of war in Tan’s novels promises a brighter future of a dream coming true” (205).

Kwan recommends a trip to China to her sister Olivia along with Simon. Simon also agrees on the idea. The real purpose of the China trip is to discover Olivia and Kwan’s connection to the Yin world. Kwan wants to make use of this opportunity to patch up Olivia’s broken relationship with her estranged husband Simon. An assignment from an American magazine for both Simon and Olivia works as a catalyst fora joint trip of Olivia and Simon to China. Unfortunately the thoughts of Elza
makes Olivia restless, making her suffer from an emotional breakdown often. So, she agrees to travel to China with Kwan to trace her Chinese ancestors and also to have reunion with Simon. She is psychologically disturbed and this disturbance manifests in her identity formation.

Kwan takes her sister to China chiefly to get her sister acquainted with her Yin world and to convince her about who she was in her previous birth. Also she wants to make use of the opportunity to bring reunion between Olivia and Simon. She is able to convince Olivia that she was the one-eyed servant girl, Ninumoo working for Western missionaries in Changmian in the 1860’s and her relationship with Miss Nelly Banner, an American. Olivia also gets back her love-life with Simon irrevocably. Hence Kwan succeeds in achieving both the purposes. Kwan takes over the narrator role at the point of her arrival in China along with Olivia and Simon and the author’s decision to choose the occasion of their reaching China to shift the narrator’s role to Kwan shows her as an experienced novelist.

The one highly notable factor is the interaction between the siblings that occurs as a result of birth order. Elder siblings often become role models whereas younger ones become learners and supervise. The role of birth order also depends greatly and varies greatly on family context. Various theories put forward by experts about the influence of birth order on sibling relationship do not have any tangible relevance to the relationship between Kwan and Olivia. Thus:

Although a substantial literature has documented a wide variety of birth order effects in health, intellectual performance, and behavior, the magnitude of these effects, and the nature of the domains in which they express themselves, remain sources of scholarly contention. Within the family, the role of birth order appears to be considerable in the expression of personality, social attitudes, and family sentiments. By contrast, in non-familial contexts, these effects are more muted. Moreover, the expression of birth-order effects is often dependent, outside the family milieu, on whether or not certain attitudes and sentiments about the family are tapped in ways that make them salient. (Sulloway162)

The enormous astonishment from ‘behavioral genetics research’ is the extensive role played by the non-shared atmosphere, which is seven times more powerful than the shared ones. “The family, however, is substantially a non-shared environment, and the bulk of its influence is therefore specific to each child” (Sulloway 166). Children are hereditarily different from one another. At times often dissimilarly occurs to the same shared reactions from other clan members.

In the case of Kwan and Olivia, the Birth Order influence on their relationship does not perfectly fit into the realm of studies conducted so far. Kwan being the first sibling, older by twelve years than her half sibling Olivia, is able to exert influence on her sibling’s thought process. Though, Olivia is reluctant to accept her half-sister’s assertion about the ghost world and her ability to see the dead people with her ‘yin eyes’, she finally accepts what Kwan says and hence she agrees to make a trip to China to experience her past life association with Kwan. Eventually, it becomes clear that there does exist some connection between the intimacies of Kwan with Olivia with that of Nunumu towards Miss. Banner. The relationships in the past lives continue in the present lives of also, but in different forms. Olivia finally gives up her disparagement and accepts though somewhat reluctantly Kwan’s faith in the concept of secret senses. At the novel’s conclusion, Olivia spurts out: "The world is not a place but the vastness of the soul. And the soul is nothing more than love, limitless, endless, all that moves us toward knowing what is true. . . . And believing in ghosts -- that's believing that love never dies.”(HSS 358)

**CONCLUSION**

The factors that have been taken into account for the purpose of analyzing the relationship between Kwan and Olivia range from their positions in the family framework, family norms in the matter of children’s behavior and the mutual support between the siblings. Their different cultural bases, geographical farness and western and non-western family systems were also some of the other parameters employed in the analysis etc. As the story progresses, the reader can notice that Olivia’s
individual personality does undergo changes due to the presence of Kwan in her life as sister. Irrespective of the fact that these two half-sisters belong to two different nations and two different schools of thoughts, their relationship, despite being subjected to so many tests, remain intact throughout, in terms of their mother-daughter sort of bond thanks to the author Amy Tan’s flawless presentation style of the characters and the incidents in her novel The Hundred Secret Senses.

REFERENCES


