OFF CAMPUS

THE COMPLEXITIES OF SIBLING DYNAMICS

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Sibling relationships force two opposing emotions to coexist — the same person can feel like your greatest ally and your greatest enemy.

Siblings are your first playmates, first rivals, first accomplices, first bullies, fiercest defenders, and sneakiest snitches. They know how to get under your skin faster than anyone else in the world, how to embarrass you, and how to make you miserable. Yet, you've also shared whispered conversations huddled under the covers in the dark, birthday celebrations, month-long family vacations, and an entire childhood.

Sibling rivalry often grows out of competition for finite resources inside a family — primarily, parents' attention, approval, and affection. Specifically, perceiving unequal treatment can strain sibling relationships well into adulthood.

According to the late psychologist Dorothy Rowe, childhood clashes serve a psychological purpose. In *My Dearest Enemy, My Dangerous Friend: Making and Breaking Sibling Bonds*, Rowe noted, "Siblings may scream insults at one another, or exchange heavy blows, or destroy each other's possessions. Such fights are bitter and vicious, necessarily so because each sibling is fighting for survival as a person."

This fight for individual survival can force siblings to take completely different paths. Judy Dunn, a developmental psychologist, explains in *Separate Lives: Why Siblings Are So Different* that siblings work out early on what aspects of the other's personality make the other a success and then try to make themselves as different as possible. The more time they spend in the same family, the more different they get. As Dunn puts it, "You try and secure your own identity not by emulating a sibling, but by reacting against them. You become an individual by not being your brother or sister."

Tasnim Rodoshi Hassan, the elder of two, doesn't sugarcoat what that looked like in their household. "We were absolutely awful to each other growing up," Tasnim shares. "We fought over everything — the TV remote, whose turn it was to use the family phone, who took whose stuff without asking, or who got the bigger portion during meals."

The disputes, Tasnim acknowledges, look small, silly, and petty now — but not at the time. "Looking back, all our arguments sound so ridiculous that I feel embarrassed talking about them. At the time, though, every single one felt like a matter of principle."

Tasnim remembers the school mornings with something akin to horror. "One of us would lock the bathroom to do our hair, and the other would be outside, screaming and frantically ramming the door."

Nothing was ever fully resolved or forgiven. It was stored away to be leveraged later. "We mentally kept score of everything the other did, and whenever we started a new argument, we'd always end up bringing up things that had happened three years earlier," Tasnim recalls.

Even mutual silence wasn't peaceful; rather, it was fraught with tension. "We'd spend entire car rides refusing to acknowledge each other's presence, then get into a row over whose elbow had crossed an imaginary line five minutes later," Tasnim continues.

Tasnim believes that at the root of it all was constant proximity to each other and what she'd perceived as blatant favouritism. "The problem was that we had to share everything — our room, our food, our parents' attention, even the air we breathed," Tasnim admits. "I couldn't stand how much my parents babied her. She could get away with things I never could, and she wasn't expected to obey the rules the way I was. She'd throw a tantrum, and my parents would give in to her demands — regardless of how unreasonable they were."

People offered Tasnim well-meaning reassurances, but they failed to make her feel better: "Adults kept insisting we'd outgrow and laugh about it someday, and it only made me more furious back then."

Tasnim wasn't wrong to be sceptical of their words. What actually made things better wasn't that the two of them had managed to work through the underlying issues—it was moving out. "We don't really fight as much anymore," Tasnim concedes, "and yes, it's simply because we don't live together for most of the year."

For Nusaiba Binte Asad, the elder of two, the mend didn't happen with distance but time — her relationship with her brother improved through the mutual understanding that comes with growing up.

Nusaiba describes years of antagonism from her brother: "Growing up, we were worlds apart, despite being close in age. He would constantly annoy me, ruin my things, and treat everything as a joke. I could never trust him with a secret because it would immediately reach our parents, and cause things to escalate."

The circumstances improved once he started college, and, in Nusaiba's words, "he became more empathetic and emotionally aware." Nusaiba adds, "Today, our relationship is completely different. We share things I never imagined we would, and if there's a disagreement at home, he'll speak up to back me up. If I have a problem, I know he'll listen instead of dismissing it. For us, sibling love wasn't immediate — it was something we grew into when we finally learned to see each other as complete human beings."

Not all siblings can reach reconciliation. Farha Fauzia, the youngest of three, and her eldest brother have never gotten along, and there's no single incident that accounts for it.

"People always assume there must've been one massive fight that we're still holding a grudge over, but there wasn't," Farha shares. "He just has this uncanny ability to bring out the absolute worst version of me, dragging me back in time to our younger years. Just being in his vicinity makes me easily irritated, defensive, and more reactive. I start recalling past grievances and replaying old arguments."

What frustrates Farha most is the consensus that blood alone should outweigh all of that. Farha wholeheartedly disagrees. "People always say, 'But he's your family.' But I don't believe that family should get a free pass to disrupt your life. Just because we share DNA doesn't mean I owe him a place in my life."

Farha has come to terms with the fact that she and her eldest brother simply don't work. "Accepting that we are fundamentally incompatible — and that it's okay to protect my peace of mind by staying away — was the most freeing thing I've ever done. I genuinely wish him well, for sure, but I also wish him far away from me."

Put side by side, these three accounts don't fit into the single narrative that most of us were raised on: Sibling fights are just a childhood phase; it could well be. Sometimes, however, it hardens into real, lasting dislike.

Whether these relationships end in carefully maintained distance, hard-won reconciliation, or even estrangement, acknowledging the darker side of the bond is essential. Only by recognising that resentment, just as much as love, can we truly understand the full, complex reality of what it means to be a sibling.



PHOTO: **SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED**

References:

1. Basic Books (1990). *Separate Lives: Why Siblings Are So Different.*
2. Routledge (2007). *My Dearest Enemy, My Dangerous Friend: Making and Breaking Sibling Bonds.*