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THE DUTIFUL-MOTHER SYNDROME IN LISA ALTHER'S *KINFLICKS*

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Lisa Alther, born in Kingsport, Tennessee, on July 23, 1944, and eventually transported to Vermont, producing her first major novel, *Kinflicks*, in 1976. The setting for *Kinflicks* is Hullsport, Tennessee (Kingsport), but Alther writes of much more than individual Southern women. She does not write just for women for just for the South. Alther writes not only of the way things have been and of the way they are, she writes of the consequences of learning to cope with the excess baggage of outside expectations and how to understand and accept The Self. She transcends gender and region and social status to contribute to American contemporary literature a tone of voice (according to John Leonard) "missing in American fiction for years" (4).

Although Alther writes, in much of her fiction, about the search for identity and wholeness within The Self, she al so writes of women locked within t he trap of performing their duty to The Other (which may represent another person or group or ideology). Mrs. Babcock, the mother in Alther's *Kinflicks*, for example, is identified solely by her husband's name or as Ginny's mother; we never learn her first name. Mrs. Babcock remains trapped until her death into doing what is expected of her by other people. This woman epitomizes the dutiful-mother syndrome. She is so submerged into the identities of others that she is unable to help her daughter to understand that one can, indeed, make choices. Instead, Ginny moves in and out of identities that are prescribed by other people, by her heritage, by being born in the South, and by being female. It seems, at first, that Ginny will end up much like her mother, catering to The Other in some attempt to achieve something that can never be found except within The Self.

Lisa Alther reveals in a letter dated September 11, 1987, that she was spending a lot of time thinking about "the process of self-definition" and that "you have to go through a period of defining yourself via externals including other people, and having those definitions fail you, prior to arriving at the understanding that the definition has to arrive from within." Alther works through those external forces that affect self-definition -- arriving at the conclusion that only The Self and not The Other can provide any satisfying and long-lasting answers. By the end of *Kinflicks*, she arrives at the same conclusion that she states in the letter of September 11, 1987: "I think it's possible to grow, and change in positive ways, and learn, but I don't think it's easy. In fact, it seems to take a lifetime for most people." Indeed, for Mrs. Babcock, it does take a lifetime. She must die for Ginny to experience positive growth, and Ginny must confront her own mortality in the body of her dying mother.

Ginny's initiation into the one role that will follow her throughout the entire book begins, predictably, with Mrs. Babcock. Ginny's mother spends her life nurturing her husband and Ginny, performing her wifely and motherly and womanly duties. She bequeaths these ideas to Ginny by projecting the traditional Southern role of women who must be totally dedicated to the family while sacrificing their own identities. Mrs. Babcock does not realize until s he is on her deathbed that "by always doing everything in advance of their requesting it," she had "undermined their drive and self-confidence" (261-62).

When Ginny's own daughter Wendy is born, Ginny somehow believes that the birthing and nourishing process will make her whole, but even this so-called mystical experience of physical and emotional attachment can never reveal the answers Ginny so desperately seeks. Buried in housework, in child care, and in volunteer work, Ginny's own identity is submerged, similar to the way Mrs. Babcock's identity always retreated in favor of the needs of her family. Physical bonds do exist between mother and daughter, and it is difficult for Ginny to separate what is expected and required from what is felt and experienced:

> All these bodies that she wasn't permitted to lust after. First her mother's and the Major's, her brothers'. Then Wendy's. . . . Both Wendy and her mother she thought of largely in association with certain sounds, smells, caresses. And yet her interest in them both was expected to be platonic. (96)

It is finally beginning to dawn on Ginny that she cannot find her niche in society, in a family, or in the human scheme until she confronts herself -- individually and separately from The Other. She does realize that there is something more, but she continues to struggle within the confines of relationships -- a futile struggle. When she finally begins to come to terms with the void she is experiencing in her present predicament, she thinks, perhaps, that the answer may be provided by the world at large and by society in general:

> It's not enough! It's not *enough*, I kept wailing. So what if you *do* have descendants? That still doesn't prevent your suffocating on factory emissions, doesn't prevent your being sizzled in a nuclear holocaust, doesn't prevent your dying an agonized death...The world *needed* me, and I was trapped here in the woods rinsing bibs and mashing bananas! (406)

Only after Ginny returns to her hometown of Hullsport to attend her dying mother does she attempt to come to terms with her own coming of age. According to Alice Adams in "Endjokes," a review of *Kinflicks*, Ginny and Mrs. Babcock must both "come to terms with each other and with death, and that is what *really* goes on in this novel" (98). Thus, it is only after the actual biological death of Mrs. Babcock that Ginny has any hope of finding her own identity. Even though the death occurs at the end of the novel, we are acutely aware that Ginny is finally able to arrive at a new beginning to find her own way, unencumbered by family roots or duties or rules or obligations. For the first time, she is totally alone without parents or relationships and associated ideologies.

Before this final autonomy is available, however, Ginny must confront the most elusive and internalized, yet the most important and revealing of all human relationships: the mother/daughter interaction. In *My Mother/ My Self: The Daughter's Search for Identity*, Nancy Friday summarizes the symbiotic partnership that exists between mother and daughter from the womb and through various states of development:

> The fetus is in *physical* symbiosis with the mother; literally, it cannot live without her. The mother . . . is in *psychological* symbiosis with the unborn baby. . . . The next stage of development is *separation* [and] the long march toward individuality and self-reliance has begun. . . . Incomplete, unsatisfying, or interrupted symbiosis stamps a woman for life [and] . . . becomes a problem of juggling security vs. satisfaction. (57-62)

The stage is set, to a certain degree, before Ginny is born. The progress she can make is determined by how her mother handles the symbiosis, by how Ginny is able to come to terms with it, and by how both mother and daughter are able to come to view each other. Joan Lord Hall expands on Friday's symbiotic notion as it specifically relates to Ginny: "This paradox, of finding autonomy actually within a symbiotic organism, is one that

may heal the frantic dichotomies of [Ginny's] earlier lifestyles" (346).

In science, according to Brock, Smith, and Madigan in *Biology of Microorganisms*, the various symbiotic relationships may be parasitic -- one organism benefits and the other is harmed, commensalistic -- one benefits and the other is not affected, neutralistic -- the two organisms have no effect on each other, or mutualistic -- both organisms benefit by the relationship (452). Unfortunately, a mutualistic relationship between Ginny and her mother doesn't occur until almost immediately before Mrs. Babcock's death. Symbiosis, by definition, precludes a relationship that is harmful or destructive to both organisms. Humans are evidently the only organisms with this potential for mutual devastation. Perhaps the term *miasmatic* should be added to the psychological lexicon (if not the scientific) to include reciprocal destruction -- whether consciously and purposely intended or inherently and unknowingly transmitted. For example, Ginny realizes as she coaxes her own daughter, Wendy, to eat her vegetables that "parents [spend] years urging their children to eat, and that those children, grown, [spend] the rest of their lives trying to stop eating" (157). It is not just food that mature adults must stop ingesting -- it is the inherited value systems and judgments and philosophical frameworks inflicted by parents onto their vulnerable and receptive children.

Paul Levine, in his essay "Recent Women's Fiction and the Theme of Personality," recognizes the overwhelming power and influence that mothers have over daughters, and, conversely, the power that daughters wield over their mothers. One answer, says Levine, in becoming one's own self is "being weaned away from [one's] mother influence. Both mother and daughter must learn to let go of their assigned social roles and establish a new relationship" (338). While Ginny and Mrs. Babcock arrive at this conclusion too late to help Mrs. Babcock, Ginny is finally able to learn from the relationship in a way that will allow her to grow into an autonomous individual. She vainly seeks fulfillment from other people, but her liberation must come from within. The real tragedy in the book is that Mrs. Babcock must lose her life for Ginny to find hers.

When Ginny arrives at the hospital, Mrs. Babcock's mother-role surfaces, and she wants to blurt out to Ginny a condemnation of her hair style and a method of how she can correct the frizziness. Mrs. Babcock realizes that her instinctive mothering has surfaced, and she is able, for once, to hold her tongue. The indictments she pours out on Ginny throughout her childhood, youth, and subsequent maturity are not, however, malicious and premeditated schemes. Once the symbiotic pattern has been established, it is difficult, if not nearly impossible, to view one's offspring as an intelligent, separate, and mature individual. As Mrs. Babcock approaches death, however, she reviews her role of motherhood and realizes that she can give Ginny one final gift -- the gift of self-realization.

Since Mrs. Babcock's only identity exists in her husband and in her children, she believes, as she reviews the accomplishments of her children, that she has failed in her life's work. She has no career apart from the home, no tangible evidence of her existence separate from the lives of her children. Ginny, too, nearly drowns in the same philosophy.

At one point in Mrs. Babcock's hospital stay, she uncharacteristically snatches a thermometer out of her mouth and send sit crashing to the floor. So unusual is this behavior that even Mrs. Babcock at first convinces herself that it is an accident: "So well-trained was she in the notion that one didn't even feel hostile emotions, much less give expression to them, for a moment she genuinely believed that it had been an accident, that her hand had simply slipped" (152). A woman in Mrs. Babcock's position is simply not allowed (by pre-existing dictates) to exhibit or even possess feelings of her own. Her emotions must be squelched in favor of what is perceived best for The Other. It is precisely this notion that Mrs. Babcock unconsciously instills in Ginny. Consequently, Ginny fears that her own identity can manifest itself only in the same terms that characterize Mrs. Babcock -- that of always doing

one's duty. "Mrs. Babcock knew she was a martyr. The children's needs in those confused and unhappy war years had swamped her own needs, had *become* her own needs" (168).

As Ginny confronts the physical body of her dying mother, she must also confront the psychological and emotional make-up of her mother. At the same time (and this is the most painful), Ginny must confront her own motives and instincts which are embedded in those of her mother. She still needs to think of her mother as "strong and healthy and invulnerable -- a shield between Ginny and mortality" (150). Although facing her own mortality is an important issue, much more than the physical act of dying is being confronted. Ginny finally begins to realize that her own actions and beliefs (no matter how she has expressed them outwardly) are simply a part of the paradigm established, for the most part, by her mother.

Ginny, unlike her mother, can actually pursue her own dreams and goals devoid of the sense of duty that permeates the very existence of her mother. By the time Mrs. Babcock is freed of The Other, she is lying in a hospital bed with no time left to pursue what she wants and could do if she hadn't felt so pressured by what she considers her duty. She vents her rage on Ginny as she realizes what has happened to her:

> You've done *nothing* with your life but pursue your selfish personal pleasures. Me -- I've *always* done my duty. I waited on you and your father and your brothers hand and foot for years. For the first time in my life, I had no one to account to but myself. I was going to travel, go back to college, teach. And now *this*. Why me? (167)

Ginny can break the pattern; indeed, Ginny *does* break the pattern of servitude so that she is able to journey toward her thirties without being encumbered by The Other. Ginny is freed from those imposed responsibilities, unlike her mother who is "falling apart in a hospital bed after years of satisfying other people's needs, without ever having had a chance to figure out what *she* might need" (169).

Ginny, who has been unable to find fulfillment in any of her relationships (including those with her mother or her child), attempts to adopt and nourish some orphaned baby birds in another futile try at mothering and at struggling to find a purpose for her existence. Even though the books on birds warn against it, Ginny does her best to feed the birds, to teach t hem to fly, and to mother them. One by one, they die anyway, until the last one, finally grasping at the idea of flight, crashes around in its new-found freedom and kills itself trying to fly out of a closed window. According to Patricia Beer in a review of *Kinflicks*, "The bird sees how to fly, at the wrong time and in the wrong place. Like Mrs. Babcock" (254).

As Mrs. Babcock slowly slips away from life, she and Ginny spend their time together watching a soap opera (ironically titled "Hidden Heartbeats") and discussing the lives of the characters. The rest of their tense conversations are mainly superficial chats about mundane matters or surface, verbal slaps at each other. Even when they do come close to the real issues, death and relationships and identity, they barely skirt the truth. It is easier to return their attention to a television program and the "moral dilemmas of modern America" (369).

The revelations about self, finally matured and understood by Mrs. Babcock and newly planted and waiting for nourishment in Ginny, are barely discussed by the two women. Instead, each one remembers the past, sifts through her own version of each one's kinflicks, and assimilates the knowledge alone. Mrs. Babcock, now needing life's blood from Ginny, sees herself become the child in the relationship:

> A subtle shift in the balance of power between Ginny and herself had occurred, and she didn't like

> it at all. The pattern had always been Mrs. Babcock's bleeding herself dry . . . for the children. Nothing had ever been too much for them to demand of her. . . . Ceasing to serve, she had collapsed, mentally and physically. (261)

Somehow Mrs. Babcock would like to help Ginny to break out of the established pattern, but she is unsure of how to accomplish the task. When Ginny asks her mother whether she should return to her husband and child, she fully expects Mrs. Babcock to begin issuing orders about returning them to fulfill her duty. It is, in fact, a struggle for Mrs. Babcock not to give this particular advice. Instead, for the first time, she tells Ginny that she simply doesn't know what she should do. Lying in bed, with little to do but think, Mrs. Babcock realizes that "parents expected too much of children; it was unfair to use them, as she now recognized she herself had been used, to fulfill parental ambitions or philosophies" (430). Ginny is understandably shocked at her mother's acquiescence in allowing Ginny to make her own decisions and wonders if it could be finally possible that the "generational spell [may] actually [have] been broken" (431).

As Ginny ponders the new "non-advice" from her mother, she grows angry, believing that Mrs. Babcock owes her "some explanations! About life and death, about love and marriage and motherhood!" (506). Finally, in the last hour of her life, Mrs. Babcock is able, with one sentence, to free Ginny of the past, of the bonds that unite her to The Other. Mrs. Babcock's final words to Ginny, the final mother/daughter irony, are: "Look after *yourself* [emphasis added], Ginny dear" (508). It is only now, with the death of Mrs. Babcock, that Ginny is free to continue her search, as Mary Anne Ferguson, in "The Female Novel of Development and the Myth of Psyche," says, "purged of her own fear of becoming like her mother . . . free to become an autonomous adult" (66).

Through Ginny's search for a self-fulfilling identity, the communication gap between generations, the rites of passage, the political and social mores of an era, and the evolving place of women in a man's world are reviewed and analyzed. Mrs. Babcock finally helps Ginny to open a door which will allow her to find her own way, unencumbered by family roots or duties or rules or obligations. If Ginny has learned enough, and we can assume that she has, she will be able to allow her own daughter's growth as separate and apart from hers, fostering not only the individual development of each but the enhancement that can occur within the relationship when both members are fulfilled. As Ginny learns from the pain of her own self-defeating relationships, The Self must be complete and whole before it can interact successfully with The Other. The Other can never function as a replacement of Self, and Ginny learns the lesson painfully well.

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