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### **Child Maltreatment and Developmental Issues in Alex Flinn's Breathing Underwater: A Psychoanalytical Reading**

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#### **Abstract:**

Alexandra Flinn is the author of the 2001 novel *Breathing Underwater*. This is her debut novel. She is acclaimed for her young adult novels. Her young adult novels – *Breathing Underwater*, *Breaking Point*, *Nothing to Lose*, *Fade to Black* – all these have been praised for their edgy realism. Her work *Breaking Point* focuses on school violence and peer pressure. After completing her high school, she graduated from the University of Miami, acquiring a degree in vocal performance (opera). She then joined a law school at Nova South Eastern University. She had practiced law for ten years and then retired to devote all her time to writing. At the law school, while practicing as an intern, Flinn came across many cases of domestic violence. She was carried away by such harsh experiences and later drew her novel *Breathing Underwater* on these. By and by, she had got back to her writing and decided to devote more time on writing only. Her legal and volunteer tasks with deranged and wrecked women vigorously determined her choice for the subject-matter of her first novel *Breathing Underwater*. As statistics states, about twenty-six percent of high school and college goer women report having been in an abusive relationship. Moreover, one of the clients in the shelter for battered women (where Flinn volunteered) was put to death by her husband in front of her children. This event had exerted a strong influence on her mind and she came to the realization that the issue of abuse required comprehensive understanding. Flinn has discovered in her research that the troubled domestic life of the abuser sets the cycle for further abuse in action. She feels that through the character of Nick Andreas, the protagonist in *Breathing Underwater*, she could explore and examine the taproot of the cycle of abuse in details.

**Key Words: Abuse, Childhood, Abuser, Dating violence, Psychoanalysis**

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Alexandra Flinn is the author of the 2001 novel *Breathing Underwater*. This is her debut novel. She was born in Long Island, New York in 1966 and grew up in New York, Miami and Florida. Her family moved to Miami when she was in the middle school. She had difficulty in making friends and hence, she spent most of the time reading and writing. She had studied opera in her college and then joined law school at Nova Southeastern University. Her life and experience at the law school helped her write her debut novel *Breathing*

Underwater (2001). She had moved to Florida when she was twelve where she continued to live till now.

She is acclaimed for her young adult novels. Her literary work *Beastly* (2007) is New York Times' bestseller. Her other works like *A Kiss in Time* (2009), *Cloaked* (2011), *Bewitching* (2012), *Towering* (2013) and *Mirrored* (2015) – all are modern retellings or reimagining of some well-known stories from fairytales (all these novels come under the group of writings categorized as 'Kendra Chronicles'). She has authored other novels on adolescents such as *Breaking Point* (2002), *Nothing to Lose* (2004), *Fade to Black* (2005) and *Diva* (2006). At a very early age, she decided to pursue her career as a writer. She had made her early efforts to write in some renowned magazine, which refused to publish her works. As a taciturn and bashful girl, she struggled hard to make friends at her new school. This experience at school set the tone for some of her works on young adults – *Breaking Point* in specific.

After completing her high school, she graduated from the University of Miami, acquiring a degree in vocal performance (opera). She then joined a law school at Nova South Eastern University. She had practiced law for ten years and then retired to devote all her time to writing. She has won many prestigious awards including American Library Association Best Book for Young Adult, Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers Awards in 2001, Children's Literature Choices List, Rhode Island Teen Book Award Master List 2002 and many more.

Her young adult novels – *Breathing Underwater*, *Breaking Point*, *Nothing to Lose*, *Fade to Black* – all these have been praised for their edgy realism. Her work *Breaking Point* focuses on school violence and peer pressure. *Nothing to Lose* deals with abusive relationships, violence and emotional disintegration. *Fade to Black* attempts to showcase the life of a high school goer who faces discrimination and trepidation after being diagnosed with HIV. Paula Rohrlick points out in her review of *Nothing to Lose* that "Flinn doesn't hesitate to tackle disturbing topics and succeeds in making the experiences and emotions of her protagonists realistic and gripping" (Rohrlick, 14).

Flinn has been an avid reader since early age. This interest in reading exposed her to writers like Astrid Lindgren, Beverly Cleary, Judy Blume, Marilyn Sachs and Laura Wilder. At the law school, while practicing as an intern, Flinn came across many cases of domestic violence. She was carried away by such harsh experiences and later drew her novel *Breathing Underwater* on these. By and by, she had got back to her writing and decided to devote more time on writing only. Her legal and volunteer tasks with deranged and wrecked women vigorously determined her choice for the subject-matter of her first novel *Breathing Underwater*. As statistic states, about twenty-six percent of high school and college goer women report having been in an abusive relationship. Moreover, one of the clients in the shelter for battered women (where Flinn volunteered) was put to death by her husband in front of her children. This event had exerted a strong influence on her mind and she came to the realization that the issue of abuse required comprehensive understanding. While

researching on this issue, she began to read books on counselling and abuse. She also took interview of various women who worked in a domestic violence program.

In addition, she started reading young adult novels to have a better understanding of the nook and corner of the mind of teenagers. Flinn commented in an interview with Sue Corbett for Knight Rider/Tribune News Service where she states:

“I knew that I wanted to write Young Adult...and I saw little out there about this subject. I had a daughter and thought there should be something out there so that girls would recognize the warning signs of such a relationship” (Flinn, 38).

Flinn is particularly influenced and impressed by the works of Richard Peck. She claims, that is how she has learned the right way to pen down a novel, by adding her own style afterwards. Flinn explains what prompted her to write the novel as,

“When I close my eyes, I am still thirteen years old...I remember everything about that time in sharp focus, the pain of not really fitting in at school, struggles with schoolwork, wondering if I'd ever meet the guy of my dreams, and wanting so bad to grow up because I felt it was the light at the end of the tunnel. I write my books for that girl, what she would want to read” (Flinn, 37).

It is noteworthy that, Flinn has discovered in her research that the troubled domestic life of the abuser sets the cycle for further abuse in action. She feels that through the character of Nick Andreas, the protagonist in *Breathing Underwater*, she could explore and examine the taproot of the cycle of abuse in details.

Flinn tackles another serious juvenile issue like ‘school violence’ in her novel *Breaking Point*. Fifteen-year-old Paul, the protagonist as well as the narrator, suffers at crossroad in his youth after his parents have separated.

*Breathing Underwater* is alarming and foreshadows the imminent future of many romantic relationships of the present time. It showcases the grave and less-discussed but all-too-common issue of ‘dating violence’. Flinn had based the book on her experiences while working as an intern at the State Attorney's office where she was volunteering with abused women. She thought this was a really crucial subject-matter to write on since 27 percent of teenage girls have been surveyed and found to be hit by a partner.

*Breathing Underwater* tells the story of Nick Andreas, a wealthy teenager who is suffering silently with his abusive father and, in turn, abuses his girlfriend Caitlin McCourt. Nick has a troubled past. When he hits her, she files a 'restraining order' and the court orders him to take a Family Violence class. Eventually, Nick begins to re-evaluate his abusive behavior towards Caitlin and his damaged childhood. Since Nick is compelled to encounter his emotional damage and troubled past, he now learns to take accountability for his actions. He also learns that change and growth are also possible now.

When he is sentenced to counselling and journaling by the Judge in the Court after beating Caitlin, Nick thinks he does not deserve this punishment. He condemns that she is lying and denies hitting her. He rationalizes to himself and others that he did not actually did hit her rather just slapped her.

During his first journal entries, he is still embittered by the incident and wishes to put the blame on other people. He comprehends his court-ordered Family Violence classes as a way for him to not improve his behavioral patterns but rather as a means to win Caitlin back.

However, as Nick explores his thoughts and actions from the past through regular journaling, he becomes more self-aware of the pain he is responsible for. This realization reaches its peak when he witnesses Leo's abusive behavior towards Neysa. Comprehending another toxic and abusive relationship from the perspective of an 'outsider', offers Nick an unsettling insight into how wrong his own behavior towards Caitlin was. Gradually, he starts taking the therapy more seriously, abandoning his urge to get Caitlin back and sincerely apologizing for his treatment of her.

With the aid from his Coach Mario, Nick begins to learn that he must take responsibility for the consequences of his actions. If Nick intends to live a better life and be a better person, he must transform the toxic behavioral patterns which are an outcome of his toxic and abused past life with his father. This realization provides him the courage to take a stride for himself and confront his father.

Narrated through the journal entries of Nick, *Breathing Underwater* weighs up abusive relationships from the perspective/standpoint of an abuser, Nick. Nick is portrayed as a handsome, wealthy, popular, intelligent teenager who is a charmer, a football player, but with a low self-esteem. He is considered as one of the 'coolest' kids in the school. However, he maintains this superficial face in front of everyone. Behind the mask of vanity, his real nature veiled. Indeed, he is quite the contrary of what he shows to others – he is frenzied, demented, wrecked, by his abusive father who perpetually calls his son "a loser". According to his father, Nick is 'a good for nothing'. Nick saw his mother for the last time when he was only five.

He is submerged in resentment, exasperation, rage and perplexity. He has many pent-up emotions which are looking for a tiny leak to blow off. He approaches Caitlin, whose self-confidence is even lower than that of him. They soon start dating. However, Nick eventually begins to re-enact the abuse done to him on Caitlin, transforming from a loving and caring partner to a verbally demeaning and finally, a physically abusive one.

The novel is narrated in a dual-tone-narrative, aligning Nick's journal entries with his post-court return to his high school. At first, he refuses to take responsibility for his wrongdoing or to take part in the Family Violence Class. Nevertheless, a wake-up call hits Nick in the form of a tragic occurrence. Leo, another abusive and resistant member of the Family Violence Class, kills his girlfriend and takes his own life.

Nick's abuse of Caitlin emanates from his inability to effectively convey his pent-up emotions to anyone, not even to his best friend Tom. Nick Andreas is an anti-hero and reminds the readers of Camus' Meursault in *The Outsider* (1942). Nick is 'an abuser with a history of abuse', with a tormented and dysfunctional bond with his biological father. As a consequence of such a terrible past life, as he grows up, he eventually learns that bottling everything up inside only allows him to direct his anger and resentment towards others. The novel also depicts Nick as an 'anti-hero', incapable of accepting or working on his own flaws, but later realizing it and grounding for healing.

Nick's story exhibits that a person can always transform for the better, so long as they are willing to accept accountability for their own actions and themselves. Mario upskills Nick that, completely accepting both himself (Nick) and the consequences of his actions is the only means to break the generational cycle of abuse (since he inherits the behavioral patterns of atrocity from his father's treatment towards him).

Nick initiates the journal with the entry of how he met Caitlin. His best friend Tom explains that he had known her since kindergarten, but she had lost weight over the summer. Although Nick was one of the popular kids in school, he lacked self-confidence for approaching Caitlin. Likewise, Caitlin's body-image continued to be a source of her low self-esteem. When Nick lashes out at Cait in a moment of fury, his debilitating words to belittle her hit her hard. Nick reveals in his diary: "I want to say I love you, I miss you. Instead, I whisper, 'Fat pig,' and move on" (Flinn, 28). In fact, he fat-shames her quite often because he knew how to manipulate or gaslight her owing to her inferiority complex.

After penning down this first entry, Nick begins the Family Violence class. The instructor, Mario, demands honesty, punctuality and courtesy from all the students. He tells them that if they fail to meet his requirements, they may be ordered by the Court to take the class again, or be put in the prison. The most significant rule by Mario is that the students take responsibility for their own actions and not blame their girlfriends, alcohol or drugs for their behaviour. When Mario confronts Nick about why he is there in that class, Nick admits that he only 'slapped' Caitlin and did not 'hit' her when they were having a fight. He also tells Mario that his life has been devastated because of this turbulence.

When the subject comes up in the Family Violence class, Mario tries to help the students comprehend that isolating a girlfriend from her family and friends is an instance of a controlling behavior only. He hopes to aid them to overcome such behavioural pattern.

Mario also informs the students that in the next class, they will talk about their relationship with their parents. Nick gets the impression that others have the same fright of confronting their inner demons and revisiting their traumatic childhood days. Nick writes in his journal how his father used to hit him at the slightest mistake done by him and also how his father punched him on the face when he found out that Nick had asked the housemaid to buy him a 'beer' for a party. He stayed back home the next day so that nobody could see his bruise and ask him about anything. He never even shared the story of his abused life to his best friend Tom. When Caitlin visits him that day, she gets to see the bruise and realizes

that his father had hit him. She then tries to convince Nick to talk about his abused life at least to a teacher or may be to the police. Nick refuses to do so.

In the Family Violence class, Nick manages to dodge the issue of his father's abuse to him. He tells the group that he and his father get along well. They had been together since his mother left when he was only five. Others in the class depict their childhood as enmeshed with both physical and psychological abuse.

Nick befriends Leo in the class. Leo eventually convinces his girlfriend, Neysa, to drop the charges of assault against him, and take him back so that he does not have to attend the classes anymore.

Nick continues to write about his relationship with Caitlin. He now admits that he manipulated Cait by calling her 'fat', fat-shaming her or threatening to break up with her if she did anything he didn't want her to do. He psychologically controlled her all through their relationship demanding that she would do anything only if he gave her permission to do so.

Leo stops attending the Family Violence class now as he gets back with Neysa, yet Nick still continues hanging out with him. Leo now gets Nick to admit that his (Nick's) father sometime hits him. Leo then shows Nick a gun that he keeps to threaten his mother's boyfriend. This man psychologically abused Leo, his mother and his brother.

At counselling, Mario pushes Nick into admitting the emotions he felt before he hit Caitlin. When Nick is all enraged, Mario provokes him into getting more enraged, even asking Nick to hit him. Nick is all agitated, but still does not (or rather cannot) hit Mario. Then Mario gives him the life lesson that Nick has to behave in a similar manner around woman. Instead of thinking he could bully his girlfriend or beat her, (who is usually physically weaker than him) when he is angry with her, Nick needs to learn to 'walk away' from such situation.

Nick gets uncomfortable when he watches Leo psychologically abusing Neysa. During the next Family Violence class, Nick gets to know from Mario that Leo killed himself and his girlfriend Neysa after an awful fight. This devastates Nick and he races back home, trying to deal with the emotions swirling inside him. He takes out his journal and writes about his last fight with Caitlin. When she went against his wish and performed in the school talent show, he got so insecure that he thought she had sung the love song to someone else in the audience and not to him. Infuriated and insecure, he dragged her to the parking lot and began beating her black and blue until Tom finally broke them apart.

Re-living his abuse of Caitlin in light of Leo's tragedy initiates Nick on the road to genuine healing. Nick now tells Mario that he has learned how to drown out his father's negative voices in his head. Nick tells Mario that he should take accountability for his own actions now on and also that he has learned that being a man is not about having the most power, but in taking responsibility for his actions and doing the right even when no one is watching. When the session is over, Nick asks if he can take the class again. Mario lets him.

Nick also leaves his journal for Mario to read. That night when his father tries to hit him, he protests for the first time ever in past sixteen years. The novel ends on a positive note when Tom approaches Nick and they both get back together after months, and Nick realizes his fault, follows a path towards healing the psychological wounds from his childhood.

Nick's behavioural difficulties could be interpreted from the point of view of famous Lacanian concept of the 'Name of the father'. According to Lacan, in the Symbolic Order, an infant is socially programmed through language, and that language comes from the 'father'. This 'language', here, does not necessarily mean the language we learn from our parents but the behavioural patterns a male child gets to see and learn from the parent of the opposite sex. In this novel, all Nick learns from his father is how to hide his inferiority complex by demeaning someone who is weaker than him. The thing he learns eventually does not help him when he is grown up. Rather, they push him on the brink of destruction. He was particularly damaged to think of anything beyond controlling his partner Caitlin. After his mother left in his childhood, the lack of proper moral and ethical education from his father eventually makes him a ruthless nerd- a monster in disguise. He constantly guilt-trips Caitlin by demeaning her worth and commenting on her physique. This becomes his language of communication for the rest of his adulthood. Moreover, Nick is not outspoken. Hence, he fails to vocalize his pain even to his dearest friend Tom.

Nick's behavioural issues could also be interpreted in the light of the concept 'infantile narcissistic object' propounded by Object Relations theorists. In Object Relation Theory, the mother's 'self' is the object of attachment, the object that her infant attaches to from the beginning- the object of both loves and hate. Here, in case of Nick, since his early life he has been lacking that 'self' of his mother to which he could attach all his emotions. As a consequence, all his pent-up emotions remained repressed all these sixteen years, and when he gets in touch with Caitlin, he fails to emotionally reconnect with the second most important female of his life

Another possible interpretation of Nick's character can be made with the help of another interpretive tool of Object Relations theory that is, 'symbiosis' and 'Separation/Individuation'. According to the Object Relations theory, the psychological development of the child is a part of a reciprocal process of adjustment between the child and the caregiver where both must learn to be responsive to the needs and interests of the other. Here, in case of Nick, since his childhood, his father has been fulfilling all the materialistic needs of Nick, but he radically fails to meet any emotional need of his son.

Heinz Kohut's Self-psychological interpretive tool called 'alter ego-connectedness axis or dimension' signifies the development of a person's ability to communicate feelings to significant others, form intimate relationships. The normal development of this axis is expressed in a sense of belongingness and connectedness. Nick lacks this axis in his life. He has never been through this axis. Consequently, he fails to connect emotionally with both Tom and Cait, who genuinely care for him. His father did not allow him to boost his confidence up and did not give Nick a chance to connect with him emotionally.

Breathing Underwater has been also critically acclaimed with positive tone. One renowned critic Corbett comments on Nick that “The voice of Nick, the most unsympathetic creep a reader will ever find herself feeling sorry for, is pitch-perfect” (Corbett, 12). Needless to say, Nick is a victim of abuse and is desperately looking for genuine love and affection. A reviewer observantly states that the co-relation between Nick’s controlling behavior and his father’s abuse is subtle but quite effective. Finally, he takes responsibility for his actions, an action which carries heavy emotional weight in the narrative of this novel. Another critic, Joel Shoemaker points out that Flinn’s narrative is an “open and honest portrayal of an all-too-common problem” (Shoemaker, 45). Beth Anderson states that the novel provides a “road map to warning signs” (Anderson, 19) of abuse.

Significantly, in this novel Flinn intentionally deal with an opulent group of people in the highly educated, urban society – the over-arching adolescents – only to alarm the readers that abuse may take place anywhere and is not merely an inner-city issue, and is not limited to the domesticity of illiterate, rural, low-class or poor people. Henceforth, her message reaches a broad spectrum of readers. Flinn states that she comes across not only victims of abuse, but also young fellows who confessed to her through letters that “the book really related to their lives and their anger. Both of them said they didn’t like to read, but they liked Breathing” (Flinn, 34) this time not under water, but above it.



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