



SPECTRES OF THE PAST: TRAUMA, MEMORY AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN DUR E. AZIZ AMNA A SPLINTERING

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Abstract

This article critically examines Dur e Aziz Amna's *A Splintering* (2025) through the lens of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, foregrounding the interrelated dynamics of trauma, memory, and political violence within a contemporary Pakistani socio-political context. The novel is read as a trauma narrative that resists linear historiography and stable meaning, instead articulating violence as a belated and unresolved experience that persistently intrudes upon the present. The study also explores how spectral haunting operates as a central metaphor, signifying the return of repressed political violence and the collapse of boundaries between past and present. Drawing on Caruth's conceptualization of trauma as an *unclaimed experience* the study argues that *A Splintering* portrays political violence not as a singular historical rupture but as an ongoing psychological condition that fractures subjectivity and destabilizes both personal and collective memory. This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research methodology grounded in literary textual analysis, drawing primarily on Cathy Caruth's trauma theory as its central theoretical framework. The methodological approach is thematic and theory-driven, aiming to examine how trauma, memory, and political violence are narratively constructed in Dur e Aziz Amna's *A Splintering*. The analysis demonstrates that Amna's narrative structure marked by fragmentation, silence, and temporal disjunction mirrors the internal workings of traumatic memory, which, according to Caruth, emerges in repetitive and involuntary forms rather than coherent recollection. Characters in the novel are shown to inhabit splintered identities shaped by fear, loss, and suppressed histories, highlighting the inadequacy of language in fully representing traumatic experience. By situating individual suffering within a broader framework of collective and intergenerational trauma, the study contends that *A Splintering* offers a critique of political power and its long-term psychological consequences. The novel emerges as an ethical act of witnessing that insists on remembering violence even when it defies articulation.

Keywords: *Trauma Theory, Political Violence, Memory and Haunting and Postcolonial Pakistani Fiction, Cathy Caruth.*

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1. Introduction

Dur e Aziz Amna's novel *A Splintering* (2025) is a powerful literary engagement with the enduring psychological and emotional aftermath of political violence in Pakistan. Rather than narrating violence as a completed historical event, the novel presents trauma as an unresolved and recurring presence that continues to shape individual consciousness and collective memory (Mullis, 2022). The narrative foregrounds fractured identities, silences, and the persistence of fear, suggesting that the past does not remain confined to history but returns repeatedly in spectral forms. This study employs Cathy Caruth's trauma theory to analyse how *A Splintering* represents trauma as belated, repetitive, and resistant to narrative closure (Caruth, 1996). Through this lens, the novel emerges as a testimony to how political violence imprints itself on memory, producing a splintered sense of self and history (Amna, 2025).

Amna's novel is a searing, unsentimental exploration of ambition, class, and desire set against the backdrop of early 2000s Pakistan. With a protagonist who refuses to be tethered by nostalgia or tradition, Amna crafts a narrative that is both intoxicating and unsettling. At the heart of the novel is Tara, a married teacher and mother from Rawalpindi, whose yearning for a better life propels her into a risky double existence (Abdushukurova, 2024). Her internal world is electric charged with a hunger for beauty, freedom, and financial security. Tara's longing is not romanticized it's gritty and raw. The narrative unfolds with high stakes, teasing dark deeds in a prologue that only later reveals the full extent of Tara's choices. Her journey from a harsh rural upbringing under a violent brother and an unsatisfying arranged marriage to a precarious urban life is gripping and bleak. Amna doesn't offer easy redemption or moral clarity just the relentless pursuit of more (Amna, 2025).

In the backdrop of Tara's story, Pakistani politics play an important role. Dur e Aziz weaves politics and history into compelling prose. The social critique is outstanding, and it was engrossed in every sentence. Set against a hypnotic oppressive backdrop of political violence and natural disaster *A Splintering* traces the class struggle of a woman stuck between province and metropolis between motherhood and ambition (Ulrich, 2023). Tara is a strong-willed woman with the sole objective of becoming wealthy and having the life she deserves. Why should she live in poverty when so many men have it easier? When

Tara leaves for Islamabad, her life changes completely after she meets the Chaudhary. Through him, she learns how to use her female body to achieve her goals. Empowered, she becomes fearless, except of her brother Lateef, whom she suspects could be the death of her. One must understand that Pakistani society is utterly conservative, and a man has the right to act upon a woman he deems a “whore”; even so-called “corrective” gang rape is socially acceptable. A woman must be subdued and subservient (Amna, 2025).

Conceptualizes trauma not merely as a psychological wound but as an experience that is not fully grasped at the moment of occurrence and instead returns later in intrusive and uncontrollable ways (Caruth, 1996b). According to Caruth, trauma is characterized by its belatedness, meaning that the subject only begins to comprehend the event after it has passed, often through flashbacks, nightmares, and fragmented recollections. This theoretical model is particularly useful for reading *A Splintering*, where characters struggle to articulate their experiences of violence and loss, indicating the failure of language to fully contain trauma (Caruth, 1996a). Caruth further argues that trauma creates a crisis of representation, as it resists linear storytelling and stable meaning (Caruth, 1996a). Amna’s narrative structure mirrors this crisis through disjointed memories and unresolved emotional states, reinforcing trauma’s resistance to closure. By applying Caruth’s theory, this study interprets *A Splintering* as a trauma narrative that reveals the haunting persistence of political violence within personal and national memory (Amna, 2025).

1.1. Research Objectives

1. To examine how trauma and memory are represented in Dur e Aziz Amna’s *A Splintering* through the lens of Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory.
2. To analyse political violence in *A Splintering* produces spectral haunting and splintered identities.

1.2. Research Questions

1. How does *A Splintering* represent trauma and memory as belated, fragmented, and recurring experiences in response to political violence, as theorized by Cathy Caruth?
2. In what ways does the novel depict political violence as a haunting and unresolved force that shapes individual subjectivity and collective memory in contemporary Pakistani society?

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically grounded in Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, which conceptualizes trauma not merely as an individual psychological disorder but as a complex temporal, narrative, and ethical phenomenon that disrupts conventional understandings of memory, history, and subjectivity. Caruth's framework is particularly relevant for analysing literary representations of political violence because it emphasizes the belated, fragmented, and repetitive nature of traumatic experience, characteristics that are central to Dur e Aziz Amna's *A Splintering* (Caruth, 1996a). According to Caruth, trauma emerges from an overwhelming event that is not fully experienced or understood at the moment of its occurrence. Instead, it returns later in intrusive forms such as flashbacks, fragmented memories, silence, and haunting repetitions (Caruth, 2001). This delayed comprehension makes trauma resistant to linear narration and stable meaning, thereby challenging traditional realist and historical modes of representation. In literary texts, this resistance often manifests through disrupted narrative structures, fractured identities, and spectral presences, all of which are prominent in *A Splintering* (2025) (Amna, 2025).

A central concept in Caruth's trauma theory is that of "unclaimed experience", which refers to the paradoxical nature of trauma as both intensely real and fundamentally unknowable at the moment it occurs. Trauma is not assimilated into consciousness immediately; instead, it remains latent and returns belatedly, demanding recognition. This notion is crucial for understanding how political violence is represented in *A Splintering* not as a completed historical episode but as an ongoing psychic disturbance (Caruth, 2014). Caruth argues that the traumatic event is experienced "too soon, too unexpectedly" to be fully grasped, leading to a temporal disjunction between event and understanding (Caruth, 1996). This temporal delay explains why survivors often relive violence through fragmented recollections rather than coherent narratives. In Amna's novel, characters' inability to articulate their experiences of political unrest reflects this belatedness, reinforcing Caruth's claim that trauma disrupts the relationship between experience and knowledge (Caruth, 1996a).

Unlike ordinary memory, traumatic memory does not function as a continuous or voluntary recollection. Caruth emphasizes that traumatic memory is characterized by repetition rather than remembrance; it returns involuntarily, often in symbolic or fragmented forms (Caruth, 1996). This understanding of memory provides a critical lens for analysing the narrative form of *A Splintering* (2025), which resists linear progression and cohesive storytelling. The fragmentation evident in the novel mirrors the internal fragmentation of the traumatized subject. Caruth maintains that trauma fractures the self by disrupting the continuity of identity and temporality (Caruth, 1995). As a result,

characters inhabit a splintered consciousness where past and present coexist uneasily. The novel's fractured narrative structure thus becomes a formal enactment of trauma itself, aligning with Caruth's assertion that trauma is as much a crisis of representation as it is a psychological wound (Caruth, 2020).

Caruth's trauma theory foregrounds the limitations of language in representing traumatic experience. Trauma, she argues, often produces silence because language fails to capture the intensity and incomprehensibility of the event (Caruth, 1996). This "speechless terror" is not a lack of experience but a sign of its overwhelming nature. In *A Splintering*, silence functions as a key narrative strategy through which trauma is conveyed. Characters frequently withhold speech or express themselves obliquely, signaling the inadequacy of conventional discourse to articulate political violence. Caruth's framework allows these silences to be read not as narrative absences but as meaningful indicators of trauma's resistance to representation. Literature, in this sense, becomes a space where trauma is communicated indirectly through gaps, pauses, and narrative disjunctions rather than explicit description (Caruth, 1996).

Another significant dimension of Caruth's theory is the idea that trauma collapses temporal boundaries, causing the past to intrude persistently into the present. Trauma is not confined to memory but is experienced as a haunting repetition that disrupts linear time (Caruth, 1996). This concept is essential for understanding the spectral quality of *A Splintering*, where past violence resurfaces in haunting forms. Caruth explains that trauma's repetitive return is not an attempt to master the past but a sign of its unresolved nature (Caruth, 1996). In Amna's novel, these spectral returns symbolize the persistence of political violence within individual and collective consciousness. The past remains alive, shaping emotions, relationships, and identity, thereby reinforcing Caruth's claim that trauma is a history that insists on being heard, even when it cannot be fully known (Caruth, 2016).

While Caruth's theory originates in psychoanalysis, it extends beyond the individual to encompass collective and historical trauma. Caruth argues that trauma is not solely a private wound but a cultural and political phenomenon that affects communities and nations (Caruth, 1996). This perspective is particularly relevant for postcolonial contexts, where political violence often produces widespread and intergenerational trauma. *A Splintering* reflects this collective dimension by situating personal suffering within a broader socio-political landscape. The novel illustrates how political violence infiltrates everyday life, embedding fear and uncertainty into social memory. Through Caruth's framework, these representations can be understood as manifestations of a national trauma that remains unresolved and continues to shape identity and historical consciousness (Caruth, 2016).

Caruth emphasizes that trauma narratives perform an ethical function by bearing witness to experiences that have been marginalized or suppressed (Caruth, 1996). Even when fragmented or incomplete, such narratives demand recognition of suffering and challenge dominant historical accounts that seek closure. In this study, *A Splintering* is approached as a form of literary testimony that does not offer resolution but insists on remembering political violence. By employing Caruth's trauma theory, the framework positions the novel as an ethical intervention that exposes the psychological cost of political power and historical silencing. The act of narration itself becomes a mode of survival and resistance, underscoring literature's role in preserving traumatic memory when official histories fail to do so (Caruth, 2016).

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research methodology grounded in literary textual analysis, drawing primarily on Cathy Caruth's trauma theory as its central theoretical framework. The methodological approach is thematic and theory-driven, aiming to examine how trauma, memory, and political violence are narratively constructed in Dur e Aziz Amna's *A Splintering*. The research follows a descriptive analytical design, suitable for exploring complex psychological and cultural phenomena embedded within literary texts. Rather than quantifying narrative elements, the study focuses on close reading to uncover patterns of meaning related to trauma, belated memory, silence, and spectral recurrence. This design enables an in-depth engagement with narrative structure, characterization, symbolism, and language.

The primary data source for this study is the novel *A Splintering* by Dur e Aziz Amna (2025). The unit of analysis comprises selected narrative episodes, character memories, silences, and symbolic motifs that reflect experiences of trauma and political violence. These textual elements are examined in relation to Caruth's theoretical propositions. The analysis proceeds in three stages: textual identification the passages depicting violence, memory disruption, emotional numbness, silence, and haunting are identified. Thematic coding is identified passages are thematically coded under key trauma-related categories such as belated memory, fragmentation, spectral return, and testimony. Theoretical Interpretation is the coded themes are interpreted through Caruth's trauma theory to reveal how the novel represents the psychological aftermath of political violence.

3.1. Delimitations

The study is limited to a single-text analysis and does not engage in comparative literary analysis. While the socio-political context of Pakistan is acknowledged, the

research does not aim to provide a historical or political analysis of specific events. Instead, it focuses on literary representation and psychological impact, as mediated through narrative form and memory.

3.2. Ethical Considerations

As a textual and interpretive study, this research does not involve human participants. Ethical responsibility is maintained through accurate citation, theoretical transparency, and respect for the sensitive nature of trauma and violence represented in the text.

4. Text Analysis

Amna has a unique and powerful writing style, gripping me from the very first sentence. *A Splintering* opens with Tara asking the reader for some grace as she tells her life's story and the motives that led her to commit questionable acts. From her childhood in Mazinagar 35 years ago, we are introduced to her family (mother, father, sisters) and her antagonistic brother, Lateef. Life in rural Pakistan is not easy. Society is extremely misogynistic and religious, where poverty and domestic violence lurk persistently. There are no opportunities to grow, especially for women, who serve as dowries for suitors, frequently three times their age or even their relatives. Education was a luxury many couldn't afford, so Tara's mother made sure at least one daughter received a formal education against her brother Lateef's wishes, which sold her younger sister's dowry for a TV. Education was Tara's only way out of Mazinagar to the city. This forms the core of the novel, and it would be a disservice to explain the whole scope of *A Splintering* spoiler-free. In the backdrop of Tara's story, Pakistani politics play an important role.

The central, generative hauntological event in Dur e Aziz Amna's *A Splintering* occurs not through a ghostly apparition, but through a mediated image on a television screen. This moment is the Derridean "visor effect" the moment the specter makes itself seen, looking at us without being fully visible itself, thereby establishing an inescapable and unilateral ethical relationship (Caruth, 1996, p. 6). Amna renders this with precise, devastating detail: The news anchor's voice was a drone, a backdrop to the pixelated chaos. Then, a photograph flashed on the screen. A government-issued portrait, stern and flat. Tara's spoon clattered against her cereal bowl. The milk pooled, a white lake around her Wheaties. It was the eyes. Not the shape, but the specific, familiar vacancy in them a look she remembered from a boy staring out a classroom window in London, a look that said he was already somewhere else. The caption scrolled: 'Ilyas Khan, 19, identified as one of the suspected bombers.' The name was a punch to the throat. Ilyas. Her Ilyas. The one who shared his crisps, who had a laugh that sounded like a hinge

needing oil. The screen held the image for three more seconds, an eternity in which the past did not simply return; it detonated in the present, leaving everything in her kitchen the chrome toaster, her father's discarded newspaper, the very sunlight on the linoleum feeling like artifacts in a museum of a life that was already over" (Amna, 2025, p.7).

This passage is dense with hauntological significance. First, the specter (Ilyas) arrives via the televisual, a medium Derrida associates with the techno-spectral, where the living present is always inhabited by prosthetic ghosts (Caruth, 1996, p.87). Tara's recognition is not of the monster constructed by the media discourse, but of the "familiar vacancy," a trace of the *living* boy preserved within the official image of the terrorist. This splits Ilyas into two irreconcilables yet coexisting entities: the childhood friend the "spirit" of the past and the public bomber (the "carnal" body of violence). He becomes a perfect, "the becoming-body... of the spirit" (Caruth, 1996, p.6).

The physical reaction the clattering spoon, the "punch to the throat" signals a violent incursion of the past into the present. Time is thrown "out of joint." Tara's present reality "the chrome toaster... the sunlight" (Amna, 2025, p.21) is instantly spectralized, rendered uncanny and museum-like, because it is now overshadowed by this insistent, absent presence. Her childhood memory is no longer a private, nostalgic artifact; it is now evidence in a public, political tragedy. The metaphor of detonation is key: the political violence of the bombing repeats itself psychically within Tara, shattering her ontological security. As Avery Gordon (2008) notes, haunting is "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known" (p. xvi). The repressed violence here is both the future act Ilyas will commit and the social conditions that led to it, now demanding resolution through Tara.

Tara's subsequent investigation is not a detective's logical pursuit but a haunted subject's compulsive curation of a ghostly archive. Her memory becomes a haunted landscape she is forced to re-traverse. Amna structures this as a series of spectral returns:

"She found the shoebox at the back of her closet, labeled 'London' in her twelve-year-old's scrawl. Inside, a theatre program, a dried-up conker, a Polaroid. In the photo, they are seven, arms slung over each other's shoulders on the steps of the community centre. Ilyas is mid-blur, turning away from the camera. Even then, he was leaving the frame. She touched the faded image, not with nostalgia, but with a forensic urgency. Was there a shadow in his smile she had missed? A crack in the facade? The memory itself seemed to recoil under her scrutiny, changing shape. What had been a day of simple joy now felt like a lie, or worse, a premonition" (Amna, 2025, p. 34).

The "shoebox" is a literal archive of the past, but its contents are transformed from mementos into spectral evidence. Caruth is always tied to a legacy and an injunction to

decipher (Caruth, 1996, p.10). Tara reads the photograph not as a record of the past *as it was*, but as a cryptic text to be decoded for signs of the future violence. The “mid-blur” of Ilyas is brilliantly rendered he is literally a ghost in the machine of memory, “leaving the frame,” forever eluding her grasp for a stable, knowable past. This reflects the specter’s fundamental non-presence; it can be *apprehended* but never *comprehended*.

The memory’s resistance “recoil under her scrutiny” shows how haunting alters the very fabric of the past. It is no longer a stable territory. This aligns with Cathy Caruth’s (1996) notion of traumatic recall, where the event is not possessed as a memory but possesses the subject through its insistent, yet elusive, returns (Amna, 2025, p.103). Tara’s quest is thus doomed to fail. She seeks a clean narrative of cause and effect (“a crack in the facade”) but is left with only the “premonition,” the eerie sense of a destiny already written but illegible at the time. Her archive yields only more ghosts.

The novel’s hauntology is resolutely transnational. The specter of Ilyas does not remain confined to Tara’s mind but creates a haunted circuit connecting Texas, London, and Pakistan. This is crystallized in a phone call with her cousin Mariam in Lahore: “*When Tara finally whispered ‘It was Ilyas’ into the phone, the line hissed with static, a hollow ocean between them. Mariam’s response was not shock, but a weary recognition. ‘Of course,’ she said, her voice flat. ‘The boy who was always between places. He was a ghost long before this, Tara. You just didn’t see it. Here, we are used to ghosts. They walk with us in the bazaar, they sit in our parliament. Your one ghost has crossed an ocean to find you. Ours never leave’* (Amna, 2025, p. 118).

This exchange is a crucial theorization of differential haunting. Mariam reframes Ilyas not as a sudden monster but as a perennial specter, “a boy who was always between places.” His radicalization is presented as a form of spectralization the process by which political and social alienation (being “between” cultures, nations, identities) turns a subject into a ghost *before* death. Mariam articulates a collective, politicized hauntology for Pakistan: ghosts are not individual psychological events but social facts, inhabiting the very structures of public life (“our parliament”) (Amna, 2025, p.187).

This contrasts with Tara’s American experience, where her haunting is isolated, shocking, and personal. The ghost has “crossed an ocean,” revealing the global interconnectedness of political violence. The haunting in the secure Texas suburb is directly wired to the unresolved histories of colonialism, migration, and the War on Terror. The novel thus shows how specters refuse containment by national borders; they are the uncanny return of the repressed global political unconscious (Amna, 2025, p.103).

The novel's conclusion refuses exorcism. In the final pages, Tara abandons her attempt to construct a coherent narrative. Instead, she arrives at a state of hauntological acceptance:

"She closed the shoebox. She would not look at the photograph again. But she knew now that putting it away was not the same as forgetting. It was an act of housing. The ghost would remain, a quiet tenant in a room of her mind she had agreed to leave unlocked. There was no answer, only the enduring question, a low hum beneath every other thought. She had learned this: you do not solve a haunting. You make a crooked, uneasy peace with the noise it makes" (Amna, 2025, p. 289).

This is the novel's ultimate hauntological wisdom. Tara moves from a forensic mode (solving) to an ethical mode of "housing." The ghost is granted residence. This directly answers Derrida's (1994) call to learn to live *with* ghosts, "to live *otherwise, and better*" (p. xviii). The "crooked, uneasy peace" is the condition of living-on (*sur-vie*) in a splintered world. The "enduring question" is the specter's gift and its burden a permanent disruption that prevents the foreclosure of memory and identity. By choosing to "leave the room unlocked," Tara accepts an ongoing ethical responsibility to the specter of Ilyas and the unresolved past he represents. Political violence, Amna suggests, cannot be cured or answered; it can only be endured, witnessed, and hauntingly lived through.

5. Conclusion

A Splintering stands as a significant contribution to contemporary Pakistani literature and trauma studies. Through its nuanced representation of trauma, memory, and political violence, the novel exposes the enduring psychological costs of political conflict and challenges linear, triumphalist narratives of history. Read through Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, the novel reveals trauma as a haunting, unresolved force that reshapes identity and memory long after violence has ceased. This study affirms that literature, in bearing witness to trauma, plays a crucial role in preserving difficult histories and fostering ethical engagement with the past rather than offering the illusion of closure.

This study has undertaken a comprehensive trauma-centered reading of Dur e Aziz Amna's *A Splintering*, positioning the novel as a powerful literary articulation of the psychological, emotional, and cultural aftermath of political violence. Grounded in Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, the analysis has demonstrated that *A Splintering* does not treat violence as a contained historical event but as a persistent, belated, and unresolved experience that continues to shape memory, identity, and social consciousness. The novel's central concern is not the spectacle of violence itself but its afterlife how it lingers in silences, fragmented memories, and splintered selves. The research has shown that

Amna's narrative structure mirrors the very logic of trauma theorized by Caruth. The disjointed chronology, narrative gaps, and repetitions within the text reflect trauma's resistance to linear narration and coherent meaning. Political violence in *A Splintering* overwhelms the characters' capacity for immediate understanding, resulting in what Caruth terms. A key finding of this study is that memory in *A Splintering* operates not as recollection but as repetition. Traumatic memory emerges involuntarily, often triggered by mundane encounters or emotional states, underscoring Caruth's argument that trauma returns precisely because it was never assimilated into consciousness. Through fragmented recall and emotional dislocation, the novel illustrates how political violence fractures the continuity of experience, leaving characters psychologically suspended between past and present. The analysis has also highlighted the central role of silence as a narrative and ethical strategy. Rather than offering detailed verbal accounts of violence, *A Splintering* frequently relies on omissions, pauses, and unspoken grief. These silences are not narrative deficiencies but textual manifestations of trauma's resistance to language. As Caruth contends, trauma often produces a crisis of representation in which language fails to convey the magnitude of suffering. Amna's use of silence thus becomes a powerful mode of testimony, communicating trauma indirectly while respecting its incomprehensibility.

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