

Human Rights and the Price of Upward Mobility in Dur-e-Aziz Amna's *A Splintering*

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Abstract

This thesis examines how the pursuit of human rights and upward mobility leads to tragedy rather than fulfilment for a subaltern woman in Dur e Aziz Amna's A Splintering (2025). It focuses on Tara, a young woman from a poor family in rural Punjab, Pakistan. This study applies Ratna Kapur's human rights critique to explain how Tara's ambition shifts from aspirational to avaricious and how she becomes what Kapur calls a "failed or unhappy subaltern subject." The concept of the "failed or unhappy subaltern subject" has been studied in human rights scholarship, but this investigation applies it specifically to a contemporary Pakistani novel, thereby filling a significant gap in the literature. The analysis, which is qualitative in nature, applies Kapur's theoretical framework to argue that the acquisition of human rights represents the "terminal limits" of what rights can achieve rather than the moment of liberation. The main argument is that Tara's upward mobility does not lead to freedom and happiness but instead to despair and moral corruption. Human rights, as Kapur argues, cannot produce meaningful happiness for subaltern subjects.

Keywords: Subaltern, Human Rights Critique, Failed Subject, Upward Mobility, Normalisation of Ambition, Pakistani English Fiction.

Introduction

Dur e Aziz Amna's 2025 novel *A Splintering* tells the story of Tara, a young woman from a very poor farming family in rural Punjab, Pakistan. The author Dur e Aziz Amna is a Pakistani writer; she was born in Pakistan and spent her childhood moving between different places. Her first novel, *American Fever*, came out in 2022. *A Splintering* is Amna's second novel; it came out in 2025. This time in the novel, she focused more on life inside Pakistan. She focuses on gender, class, and the difficult choices people face as they try to escape poverty. Tara spent all her childhood in a place she calls "darkness and filth"; from a very young age, she feels very embarrassed about her poverty. She desperately wanted to escape, as she couldn't bear the dirt; she always dreamt of money, freedom, status, and a life full of dignity. Tara believes that only money and rights will protect her from humiliation; she says: "Money was the only levee against indignity". However, the novel is not just simply about the story of the poor girl who succeeds against the odds; rather, it is a very dark and complicated story about what happens when ambition turns into greed. Tara's character begins as easy to sympathise with; the reader feels for her and wants her to succeed, but as the novel progresses towards her fame, as she gains status, money, and rights, something changes in her. One reviewer notices that "something in her shifts from aspirational to avaricious; from hungry to heartless". She

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becomes less and less likeable as the novel progresses: more selfish, consumed by her desires. The novel ends with the question that stays with the reader: “Has she lost more than she’s gained?” This thesis argues that *A Splintering* offers a sharp criticism of the liberal human rights project. Human rights are supposed to bring you freedom and happiness, but the novel shows the opposite: that a subaltern woman’s pursuit of rights and upward mobility can lead to tragedy rather than happiness. Tara gets everything but not happiness. To study this critique, this thesis uses Ratna Kapur’s human rights critique as its main theoretical framework. Kapur, in her 2014 article “In the Aftermath of Critique,” argues that human rights cannot give meaningful happiness and freedom to subaltern subjects. She calls such people “Failed or unhappy subaltern subjects”. This thesis applies Kapur’s idea to Tara’s journey in *A Splintering* and shows how the novel proves Kapur’s argument. This thesis is organised into several sections. The literature review defines key terms, reviews related scholarship, and identifies the research gap. The theoretical framework explains Kapur’s key concept in detail. The textual analysis applies these concepts to the novel using quotes from the text. The conclusion summarises the findings and suggests direction for future research.

Research Objectives

- To analyse how Tara’s pursuit of human rights in *A Splintering* reflects the struggles of a subaltern woman seeking freedom.
- To examine why Tara’s upward mobility and chase for status lead to loss of self and unhappiness rather than fulfilment.

Research Questions

1. How does *A Splintering* represent Tara’s pursuit of human rights and her desire to escape poverty?
2. Why does Tara’s journey toward upward mobility end in tragedy instead of the happiness she expected?

Research Significance

This study is significant for many reasons. First, no academic study has yet analysed Dur e Aziz Amna’s 2025 novel *A Splintering*. The novel is very new, and this thesis will be among the first to examine it. Second, Ratna Kapur’s human rights critique has appeared in legal and philosophical contexts; no study has applied her framework to a contemporary Pakistani novel; this thesis fills that gap. Third, the concept of the “failed subaltern subject” has been discussed in theory but not in relation to a woman’s pursuit of upward mobility in Pakistani fiction. This study shows how Tara’s ambition turned into greed and how her pursuit of rights leads to despair. Fourth, this research contributes to the growing literature on human rights by showing how a novel can critique the liberal human rights project from within a Pakistani context. Finally, the findings of this study may be valuable for other scholars working on class, gender, and human rights in contemporary Pakistani English Fiction.

Literature Review

This literature review examines existing scholarship on human rights critique, Pakistani English fiction, and class analysis. The review covers six sources. After each source, I identify a gap that my thesis will address.

Kapur (2014) challenges the claim that human rights can produce freedom and meaningful happiness for subaltern subjects (Kapur, 2014, p.25). She argues that human rights function as a “governance project” concerned with ordering the lives of non-European peoples rather than liberating them (Kapur, 2014, p.26). She introduces key concepts such as the “failed or unhappy subaltern subject” and the “terminal limits of human rights” (Kapur, 2014, p.28). This

source is important to my thesis because it provides the theoretical tools to analyse Tara's journey. However, Kapur applies her critique to legal and philosophical contexts, as well as to the film *Chitrangada*. She does not apply her framework to a contemporary Pakistani novel. My thesis fills this gap by applying Kapur's concept to Dur e Aziz Amna's *A Splintering*. Sadaf (2017) examines how contemporary Pakistani English fiction serves as a valuable counter-narrative to dominant Western writings about 9/11 (Sadaf, 2017, p. 115). She argues that Pakistani literature engages with human rights issues from a Western perspective (Sadaf, 2017, p.120). This source supports my thesis by showing that Pakistani fiction is already being studied through a human rights lens. However, Sadaf focuses on novels about terrorism, national identity, and the "war on terror". She does not examine novels about class ambition or upward mobility. My thesis fills this gap by analysing class ambition and upward mobility. In her dissertation, Sadaf (2017) argues that recent Pakistani fiction problematizes the Western universal view of human rights (Sadaf, 2017, ii). She analyses work by Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, and Nadeem Aslam. She proposes that close reading of contemporary Pakistani literature can promote what she calls the "new universalism" in human rights (Sadaf, 2017, p.150). This source supports my argument because it shows that Pakistani fiction can challenge Western human rights assumptions. However, Sadaf's dissertation was completed in 2017. It does not cover novels published after 2017. My thesis fills this gap by applying a human rights critique to a very recent Pakistani novel that has not been studied before. Qayum et al. (2025): Asma Qayum and her colleagues apply Marxist literary criticism to Tehmina Durani's novel *Blasphemy* (Qayum et al, 2025, p.5). They examine how the novel represents landlessness, lawlessness, and educational exclusion in rural Pakistan (Qayum et al, 2025, p.10). This is important for my thesis because it shows that class-based analysis is acceptable in Pakistani literary scholarship. However, Qayum uses Marxist theory criticism, not Kapur's human rights critique. My thesis fills this gap. Cruz (2026): Adrienne Cruz describes *A Splintering* as "a raw, unflinching portrait of feminine rage, gender constraints, class resentment, and the corrosive pull of worldly ambition" (Cruz, 2026). This review provides professional validation of my reading of Tara as a field subaltern subject. However, Cruz's review is a short journalistic piece, not a scholarly analysis. My thesis fills this gap by providing the first scholarly analysis of *A Splintering* using a theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework

This thesis is based on Ratna Kapur's critique of human rights, which serves as its main framework. Kapur, in her 2014 article "In the Aftermath of Critique", disagrees with the idea that human rights lead to freedom and happiness for the oppressed people. But instead, she argues that human rights often fail the very subjects they claim to help. The four key concepts from Kapur's theory guide this analysis.

Failed or Unhappy Subaltern Subject

Kapur introduces the idea of the "failed or unhappy subaltern subject" to describe the "oppressed people who do not get the promised freedom and happiness even after chasing human rights". She writes: "how the failed or unhappy subaltern subject exposes its narrative composition" (Kapur, 2014, p. 1). The word "subaltern" comes from Ranajit Guha's work, which refers to poor and oppressed people whose voices are ignored by the elite narratives. Kapur conveys the ideas of "failure" and "unhappiness" to show that, even though the subaltern gains their rights,, they do not gain liberation. This concept is central to analysing Tara in the novel *A Splintering* because she gains rights and money but becomes unhappy and loses herself.

Terminal Limits of Human Rights

Kapur says that the acquisition of human rights represents the "terminal limits" of what rights can achieve. She writes: "to argue that human rights as objects that an individual has by virtue

of being human represent the terminal limits of human rights, rather than the moment when the human subject becomes empowered and liberated" (Kapur, 2014, p.6). This means that getting rights is not the beginning of freedom; it is the end. Once a subaltern person gets legal rights, there is nothing more the human rights can offer. The system does not go further. Tara, in *A Splintering*, gains inheritance rights and financial independence. But these rights do not make her free. Instead, they become "terminal limits"; she has nowhere else to go.

Human Rights as Governance Project

Kapur argues that human rights are not neutral or universal. But instead, she sees them as a "governance project" that orders and controls the lives of non-European people. She writes: the scholars "challenge the idea that human rights are a liberating force, as opposed to being a governance project primarily concerned with ordering the lives of non-European peoples" (Kapur, 2014, p.4). This means human rights are not just about helping people; rather, they are about controlling people in accordance with Western ideas of what is right and normal. Kapur also explains that human rights "are primarily the expression of governance and disciplinary power" (Kapur, 2014, p.4). Tara's pursuit of rights in *A Splintering* can be seen through this lens. For Tara in *A Splintering*, human rights and freedom come from Western-influenced systems, which do not understand her situation as a poor woman from rural Punjab.

Human Rights Cannot Produce Happiness

Kapur directly says that human rights "cannot produce freedom and meaningful happiness". She writes that her article "challenges the claim that human rights... can produce freedom and meaningful happiness through the acquisition of more rights and more equality" (Kapur, 2014, p.1). This is a very powerful claim by Kapur, as people believe that human rights lead to happiness. She notes that "More rights do not necessarily result in more freedom and/or meaningful happiness" (Kapur, 2015, p. 15). The constant chase of rights can create unhappiness because it raises hopes that the system cannot fulfil. In *A Splintering*, Tara chases money and status thinking that it will make her happy, but the novel asks: "Has she lost more than she's gained?" This question proves Kapur's argument.

Application to A Splintering

These concepts will guide the textual analysis of Dur e Aziz Amna's 2025 novel *A Splintering*. The analysis will show how Tara becomes a "failed and unhappy subaltern subject"; it will study how human rights act as a "governance project" that disciplines her rather than freeing her; it will explore the "terminal limits" of the rights she gains. And it will show that her pursuit of rights and upward mobility does not produce happiness but instead leads to tragedy.

Research Methodology

This study uses qualitative research methodology. The primary source is Dur e Aziz Amna's novel *A Splintering* (2025). The secondary sources include Ratna Kapur's human rights critique, journalistic reviews and scholarly works on subaltern theory and Pakistani fiction. The data collection method is close reading. The researcher carefully reads the novel and collects quotes that relate to Tara's pursuit of human rights, her ambition, her upward mobility, and her transformation from aspirational to avaricious. The method of data analysis is applying Kapur's theoretical framework to these quotes. Each quote is analysed to show how it illustrates Kapur's concepts, such as "failed subject," "governance project," and "terminal limits of human rights." The researcher also uses peer-reviewed articles and books from Google Scholar and online databases. The study follows APA citation style for all the references. Ethical practices involve proper citation of all sources and giving credit to the original authors.

Textual Analysis

Failed or Unhappy Subaltern Subject

Ratna Kapur's concept of the "failed or unhappy subaltern subject" perfectly describes Tara's journey in *A Splintering*. Kapur writes that the "failed or unhappy subaltern subject exposes its normative composition" (Kapur, 2014, p.1). This means that when a poor person pursues rights but remains unhappy, it shows a problem within the human rights system itself. Tara says about her childhood: "I have no nobility. I come from darkness and filth" (Amna, 2025, p.32). This quote shows that Tara feels deep shame about her poverty; she sees herself as worthless because of where she comes from. She is a subaltern woman whose voice would normally be ignored by society. Later in the novel, Tara states her belief about money: "Money was the only levee against indignity" (Amna, 2025, p.92). This quote shows that Tara does not trust human rights or legal systems to protect her; she thinks only money can save her from humiliation. This belief leads her to a dangerous path. When Tara's mother calls her, she asks: "You said you'd never leave your job. Why did you leave it?" (Amna, 2025, p.142). This question shows that even Tara's mother notices that she has changed; the woman who once promised to always work has become different. As Tara grows older, she thinks to herself: "I was thirty-five; this wasn't a game I could play forever" (Amna, 2025, p. 176). Finally, Tara admits: "One can dance even in chains" (Amna, 2025, p. 185). The novel asks through a reviewer: "Has she lost more than she's gained?" (The Guardian, 2025). This question proves that Tara is a "failed subaltern subject" (Kapur, 2014, p. 7). She gained rights and money but loses herself in the process. Her pursuit of freedom does not lead to happiness.

Human Rights as Governance Project

Kapur argues that human rights function as a "governance project" that controls and regulates people rather than freeing them (Kapur, 2014, p. 4). She writes that human rights are "a governance project primarily concerned with ordering the lives of non-European peoples" (Kapur, 2014, p.4). *A Splintering* shows this clearly through Tara's experience. Tara reflects on her move to the city: "The city had taken us in as fugitives and made us new" (Amna, 2025, p.143). This shows that Tara is not free; she is remade into what the system wants her to be. Whenever Tara tries to do something on her own, her husband always criticises her. He says: "You do too much" (Amna, 2025, p.71). This quote shows how the system disciplines women: even after she earns money and status, Tara is still controlled. Tara's mother-in-law even controls her movements. She says "that the neighbours could see from the rooftops" when Tara wants to go to the terrace (Amna, 2025, p.56). This surveillance shows how women's bodies are regulated; the system watches her and tells her where she can go and what she can do. Tara also understands that her body is not her own; she thinks: "The house was hers, and so anything inside it, whether it be my pills or my body, was hers too" (Amna, 2025, p. 58). This quote means that even her personal life is being watched and controlled by others. Even Tara's mother, after moving to the city, is controlled by the system. The novel describes how "she spends most of the day inside, in front of the television or in the kitchen" (Amna, 2025, p. 91). This shows the city does not free people; it just changes how they are controlled. The governance project continues.

Terminal Limits of Human Rights

Kapur argues that the acquisition of human rights represents "terminal limits" on what rights can achieve (Kapur, 2014, p. 6). She writes that rights represent the "incorporation into a specific narrative of the good life and happiness, rather than the moment when the human subject becomes empowered and liberated" (Kapur, 2014, p.6). This means that getting rights is not the beginning of freedom; it is the end. *A Splintering* proves the argument. As Tara grows older, she realises her situation has limits; she thinks to herself, "I was thirty-five; this wasn't

a game I could play forever” (Amna, 2025, p. 176). This quote shows that Tara has hit a wall; she has gained rights and money but cannot go any further. The system gave her everything; it could not take her any further. It reached its limit, but she is still not happy. This is exactly what Kapur means by the “terminal limits of human rights.”

Kapur directly challenges the belief that “human rights bring happiness; she says human rights cannot bring meaningful happiness or freedom to the subaltern subjects” (Kapur, 2014, p.1). A *Splintering* proves this through Tara’s story: “I tried to remember if I was happier now than before I started.... Accumulation has been the point, not happiness” (Amna, 2025, p.176). The quote directly proves Kapur’s argument. Earlier in the novel, Tara ironically asks herself, “What more could I desire?” (Amna, 205, p.75). She got everything she once dreamt of, but she is still not satisfied; she wants more. This shows that human rights have limits; they can give you things, but they cannot stop you from wanting more. After a very short period of hope, Tara says: “The unravelling.....recommenced” (Amna, 2025, p.183). This line means that even though she thought she was happy, the despair returned.

Human Rights Cannot Produce Happiness

Kapur writes about “the exact nature of the despair that is produced from political disappointments, disillusionment and the recognition of failure” (Kapur, 2014, p.10). She describes “the resulting depth of despair produced from the realisation that this political project cannot realise its promise of freedom and meaningful happiness” (Kapur, 2014, p.1). This despair is what Tara feels at the end of *A Splintering*. Tara reflects on her situation: “One can dance even in chains” (Amna, 2025, p.185); this is a powerful admission. She thought she was free, but she realises she was always in chains. The system never freed her; it only gave her better chains. Tara reflects on her life: “I tried to remember if I was happier now than before I started.....accumulation has been the point, not happiness” (Amna, 2025, p.176). This quote is the clearest proof of Kapur’s argument: Tara gets everything she wants, yet she remains unhappy. The accumulation was the point, not happiness. One reviewer even notes that “she becomes less likeable the more her character developed” (Cruz, 2026). This line shows that upward mobility did not make Tara a better person; instead, it made her worse. The novel asks through the reviewer: “Has she lost more than she’s gained?” (The Guardian, 2025). The answer is yes: she made money and gained upward mobility, but she lost her happiness, her dignity, and herself. The novel ends without a happy resolution. Tara’s brother dies; she inherits the ring. But she weeps by his grave (Amna, 2025, pp. 188-191). She has lost more than she has gained. This is Kapur’s despair: the human rights project cannot deliver what it promises. And the despair from that realisation is devastating.

Research Findings

This analysis reveals several important findings. First, Tara is a clear example of Kapur’s “failed or unhappy subaltern subject.” She gains rights and money but loses herself in the process. The novel asks: “Has she lost more than she’s gained?” The answer is yes. Second, human rights function as a “governance project” that disciplines Tara rather than freeing her. She is constantly watched, controlled, and told where she can go and what she can do. Third, Tara hits the “terminal limits” of human rights. The system gives her everything it can, but she is still not happy. She realises she cannot play this game forever. Fourth, human rights cannot make Tara happy. She reflects: “Accumulation had been the point, not happiness.” She gained wealth and status but found no fulfilment. Fifth, Tara experiences deep despair when she realises her pursuit of rights and upward mobility was pointless. She admits: “One can dance even in chains.” She was never truly free. In conclusion, Tara’s story proves Kapur’s argument that human rights fail subaltern subjects. The novel shows that gaining rights and wealth does not lead to freedom or happiness. Instead, it leads to loss of self, despair, and tragedy.

Discussion of Research Findings

The findings of this analysis confirm Ratna Kapur's human rights critique. Tara's transformation from a sympathetic poor woman to a greedy, unlikeable protagonist proves that human rights cannot produce meaningful happiness for subaltern subjects. Kapur argues that human rights function as a "governance project" that disciplines and controls people instead of freeing them. Tara's experience supports this. She is constantly watched by her mother-in-law, controlled by her husband, and watched by society. Even when she gains money and status, she is still not free. Her body is not her own. Kapur also introduces the concept of "terminal limits of human rights." Tara reaches this limit when she realises that getting rights and money did not make her happy. She says: "Accumulation had been the point, not happiness." The system gave her everything it could. But there was nothing more. She hit the wall. Finally, Kapur writes about the "despair" that comes when people realise that human rights cannot deliver what they promise. Tara feels this despair deeply. She admits: "One can dance even in chains." She thought she was free. But she was always in chains.

Conclusion

This thesis argued that Dur e Aziz Amna's 2025 novel *A Splintering* critiques the liberal human rights project by showing that a subaltern pursuit of rights and upward mobility leads to tragedy rather than fulfilment. Using Ratna Kapur's human rights critique as the theoretical framework, the analysis revealed five key findings. First, Tara is a "failed or unhappy subaltern subject" who gains rights and money but loses herself. Second, human rights function as a "governance project" that disciplines and controls Tara rather than freeing her. Third, Tara reaches the "terminal limits" of human rights, at which the system can offer her nothing more. Fourth, human rights cannot make Tara happy. She gains everything she wanted but remains unhappy. Fifth, Tara experiences deep despair when she realises her pursuit was pointless. She admits: "One can dance even in chains." This research is significant because it is the first scholarly analysis of *A Splintering* and the first application of Kapur's human rights critique to a contemporary Pakistani novel. The study contributes to the growing literature on human rights by showing how a novel can critique the liberal human rights project from within a Pakistani context. Future research could apply Kapur's framework to other recent Pakistani novels about class and upward mobility. Other scholars could also compare *A Splintering* with similar novels from India or Bangladesh to explore how human rights critique appears across South Asian fiction.

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