

SUBVERTING THE IMPERIAL FRONTIER: A BORDER POETICS READING OF RIAZ HASSAN'S THE UNCHOSEN

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Abstract

This article examines Riaz Hassan's *The Unchosen* through the lens of border poetics, arguing that the novel subverts dominant British imperial representations of the North-West Frontier by narrating the Pak-Afghan border from a bottom-up perspective. Drawing on concepts such as *frontier governmentality* (Hopkins 2020), the *state of exception* (Agamben 2005), and the *Janus-faced border* (van Houtum 2010), the article analyses how the novel renders colonial border-making as both a material practice and an affective disruption. The protagonist's fragmented testimony, infused with silences and emotional rupture, becomes a vehicle for reclaiming memory against imperial erasure. The novel's formal structure—marked by testimonial gaps, contrapuntal narration, and political ambivalence—enacts what Schimanski and Wolfe define as *border aesthetics*, refusing to stabilise meanings and challenging colonial epistemologies. Rather than presenting tribal resistance as heroic and unified, the text foregrounds internal fractures, moral ambiguity, and gendered costs of survival. In doing so, *The Unchosen* reimagines the imperial frontier as a contested borderscape—one that exposes the violence of indirect rule and restores subaltern voices to the narrative of empire. This study thus contributes to contemporary debates in postcolonial border studies by demonstrating how literary form participates in the politics of spatial imagination and historical memory.

Keywords: cultural border studies, border poetics, frontier governmentality, Janu-faced border, borderscape, North-West Frontier, Pak-Afghan border, Pashtuns, postcolonial memory

Article Details:

Received on 16 June 2025

Accepted on 13 July 2025

Published on 16 July 2025

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INTRODUCTION

Published in 2002, Riaz Hassan's *The Unchosen* offers a rare fictional account of British imperialism in the Pak-Afghan tribal frontier, not from the vantage point of the coloniser, but from the memoryscape of a tribal elder caught within the entangled histories of resistance, collaboration, and survival. Set during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the novel reconstructs the socio-political violence of imperial frontier policies through the intimate voice of Abdul Hakim Khan, whose testimony becomes a lens through which the complexities of colonial bordering practices are unveiled. This article argues that *The Unchosen*, by mobilising a bottom-up narrative of the British intervention in the tribal areas of what is now Pakistan, subverts the dominant imperial discourse that historically framed the North-West Frontier as a chaotic periphery requiring pacification. In contrast to colonial texts that depicted the region as an anarchic wilderness populated by “fanatical” and “unruly” tribes, Hassan's novel offers a layered, ambivalent, and internally contested borderscape that reveals the psychic and material cost of colonial rule. It brings into focus what Henk van Houtum terms the “Janus-faced” nature of the border—at once protective and oppressive, enabling and fragmenting—while showing how British imperialism operated through what Benjamin D. Hopkins has theorised as frontier governmentality: the indirect administration of supposedly autonomous tribes through systems of local intermediaries, patronage, and plausible deniability.

Drawing on the conceptual vocabulary of border poetics (Schimanski & Wolfe, 2017), this article examines *The Unchosen* as a fictional borderscape that contests the visual, spatial, and epistemic regimes of imperial power. The novel not only recasts the British frontier as a site of trauma and betrayal but also performs an aesthetic politics of resistance through its fragmented narrative voice, testimonial memory, and structural dissonance. In doing so, it participates in what Jacques Rancière (2004) calls a “redistribution of the sensible,” foregrounding forms of affect, memory, and silence that refuse to be assimilated into imperial legibility. The article proceeds in four sections. The first contextualises the British imperial discourse on the North-West Frontier and outlines how *The Unchosen* counters its ideological foundations. The second focuses on the novel's representation of frontier governmentality and the colonial state of exception, drawing on the works of Hopkins and Agamben. The third section analyses the poetics of memory and resistance in the novel, with reference to border aesthetics and subaltern testimony. The final section examines the novel's portrayal of the border as a Janus-faced structure, revealing the internal fragmentations, moral ambiguities, and gendered costs of living under both colonial rule and tribal patriarchy. Together, these readings position *The Unchosen* as an important literary intervention in the politics of postcolonial borders and historical memory.

Imperial Discourse and the British Imaginary

British colonial discourse constructed the North-West Frontier of India not merely as a territorial boundary but as a civilisational threshold—one that functioned as a constitutive outside to the imagined rational order of the Raj. From the late nineteenth century onward, administrators, travel writers, and military officials repeatedly represented the region's Pashtun tribes as “fanatical,” “savage,” and

inherently insubordinate, thereby legitimising the violent exceptionalism that characterised imperial policy in the borderlands. As Benjamin D. Hopkins (2020) notes, the so-called “tribal frontier” was imagined in British strategic thought as both “a zone of danger” and a space requiring a unique mode of governance predicated on indirect rule (p. 4).

These imperial representations were not merely descriptive but performative. They constituted what Schimanski and Wolfe (2017) term a “border aesthetics”: a regime of representation through which borders are visualised, felt, and naturalised as part of broader ideological structures (p. 2). In this framework, the tribal periphery was aestheticised as a scene of chaos—its people portrayed as irrational and its terrain as wild and unmapped. Such discursive practices were instrumental in legitimising the use of collective punishment, mass displacement, and administrative bifurcation in the guise of a civilising mission.

Hassan’s *The Unchosen* forcefully disrupts this colonial imaginary. Through the voice of Abdul Hakim Khan, a tribal elder who recounts the rupture of his life-world under British rule, the novel reclaims the border not as an imperial periphery but as a site of memory, mourning, and fragmented agency. The narrative does not oppose British colonialism through symmetrical assertion or triumphant counter-history. Rather, it deploys what border theorists call borderscaping—a narrative practice that renders the border as an unstable, shifting, and affectively charged zone (Brambilla, 2015). In this borderscape, multiple subjectivities contest imperial legibility and speak from within a terrain marked by asymmetrical violence.

The novel’s resistance to imperial discourse is not merely thematic but also formal. Abdul Hakim’s memories are fragmented, non-linear, and often interrupted by silences and emotional disorientation. These narrative strategies enact what Schimanski and Wolfe (2013) identify as the aesthetics of deformation: literary practices that refuse the “fixed lines and mimetic authority” of dominant spatial imaginaries by foregrounding rupture, delay, and multiplicity (p. 241). When Hakim describes the aftermath of a British raid—“There was no sound. Even the children had forgotten how to cry. The smoke rose like questions to a God who had stopped listening” (Hassan, 108)—he is not merely narrating a personal trauma; he is refiguring the imperial frontier as a memoryscape of unspeakable devastation.

The work of Jacques Rancière (2004) is particularly instructive here. In theorising the “distribution of the sensible,” Rancière argues that political subjectivity emerges through aesthetic reconfigurations of what can be seen, heard, and made intelligible within a given order. *The Unchosen* performs such a reconfiguration. Its narrative does not speak in the register of imperial administration, but in the muted and fractured voice of the subaltern—a voice that insists on the right to opacity, to silence, and to non-translation. In this way, the novel interrupts the colonial archive’s closure and re-opens the space of the border as a contested terrain of memory and meaning.

Moreover, the novel challenges the presumed naturalness of the colonial border itself. Whereas British maps and memoranda treated the Durand Line and its adjoining territories as necessary instruments of imperial order, *The Unchosen* presents them as violent impositions on local life-worlds. Hakim’s recollection of forced migration—“We were forced to leave our birthplace and migrated to another place... I was separated from my mother, brothers and sisters” (Hassan 31)—

foregrounds the border not as a protective line but as a generator of rupture, dislocation, and loss. In this regard, the novel participates in what Brambilla (2015) describes as border-crossing memory-work: the act of narrating the border from below, against the grain of imperial cartographies and national historiographies.

The *Unchosen* dismantles the imperial representation of the tribal borderland as a static and chaotic frontier. Instead, it constructs a counter-borderscape where loss, memory, and ambivalence destabilise colonial claims to knowledge, control, and authority. This intervention is both aesthetic and political. It contests the very conditions under which the imperial frontier became intelligible, and it insists that any meaningful reckoning with this history must begin by listening to the voices empire sought to erase.

Frontier Governmentality and the Colonial State of Exception

The administration of the British imperial borderlands was shaped less by direct sovereign control than by a complex apparatus of indirect governance—what Benjamin D. Hopkins (2020) theorises as frontier governmentality. In this model, the frontier emerges not as a space to be incorporated into the colonial polity, but as a zone to be strategically managed from a distance through indigenous intermediaries, customary institutions, and selective patronage. This regime of governance was both flexible and violent: it relied on the performative autonomy of tribal actors even as it structurally embedded them within a colonial matrix of control. The figure of the Political Agent, stationed at the margins of empire, encapsulated this double logic—facilitating jirgas, distributing subsidies, and administering justice through local codes, all while evading formal colonial accountability.

Riaz Hassan's *The Unchosen* captures the lived contradictions of this imperial modality. The novel's protagonist, Abdul Hakim Khan, reflects: "The British officer handed over the charge of administration to the tribal elders... they were made responsible for controlling their own people" (Hassan, 69). On the surface, this gesture appears to honour tribal sovereignty. Yet the narrative quickly reveals it as an act of tactical delegation—a mechanism by which the colonial state governed through proxy while maintaining the illusion of non-intervention. This logic of displacement allowed the British to extend control into the frontier while denying culpability for its attendant violences.

Such practices exemplify what Giorgio Agamben (2005) terms the state of exception—a juridical structure in which the law is suspended in order to preserve the law's supremacy. The frontier, in this configuration, becomes a laboratory of emergency: a space where legal norms are selectively abrogated, where collective punishment is routinised, and where the sovereign power renders itself invisible by acting through local surrogates. Abdul Hakim's recollections of forced migration and the collapse of familial life—"We were forced to leave our birthplace... I was separated from my mother, brothers and sisters" (Hassan, 31)—mark the human cost of this exceptional governance. Here, the juridico-political abstraction of imperial strategy is re-inscribed as existential rupture.

Crucially, *The Unchosen* does not merely describe the effects of frontier governmentality; it discloses its corrosive impact on indigenous forms of authority. The jirga, traditionally a consensual institution of tribal self-governance, is repurposed as an instrument of imperial co-optation. "I was appointed as a member

of the jirga... this was the British strategy to subdue us from within,” Hakim recalls (Hassan 74). His tone is one of reluctant complicity—he recognises that participation in this apparatus entails moral compromise, yet resistance offers no safe refuge. The colonial state’s genius lay precisely in this: its ability to transform mechanisms of communal legitimacy into sites of surveillance, internal division, and self-regulation.

This dynamic maps closely onto what Schimanski and Wolfe (2017) identify as the “aesthetics of invisibility” within border regimes—strategies through which power renders itself spectral, operating through spatial and symbolic intermediaries that mask its violence (pp. 6–8). In *The Unchosen*, the Political Agent seldom appears directly. Instead, his authority is refracted through letters, bribes, threats, and intermediaries. The colonial presence is thus dispersed across a network of signs and mediations—what Chiara Brambilla (2015) calls borderscaping practices: processes by which border zones are not only governed but imagined, negotiated, and aestheticised through localised performances of power.

Moreover, the novel reveals how frontier governmentality does not merely fracture external political structures; it disrupts the inner moral compass of its subjects. Hakim’s testimony frequently vacillates between pride and shame, resistance and regret. His participation in the colonial order—whether as jirga member or tribal elder—positions him within what Agamben describes as the “zone of indistinction,” where legality and illegality, loyalty and betrayal, collapse into each other (Agamben, 2005, p. 3). In one moment, he mourns the erosion of tribal unity; in another, he admits to using British patronage to protect his village. These contradictions are not narrative inconsistencies but aesthetic enactments of the state of exception—where every ethical position is compromised by the conditions of governance.

In this sense, *The Unchosen* contributes to what Mireille Rosello and Stephen Wolfe (2017) frame as border aesthetics: a mode of representation that does not stabilise meaning but interrogates the discursive and affective labour that borders perform. The novel’s power lies in its refusal to present the frontier as either a space of noble resistance or absolute victimhood. Instead, it shows how frontier governmentality produced a zone of ambivalence—one in which survival often required ethical contortion, and where the language of autonomy was itself an artefact of imperial design. *The Unchosen* is not only a narrative about colonial violence; it is a meditation on the aesthetics of governance under conditions of enforced ambiguity. By foregrounding the uneven and recursive operations of frontier rule, the novel exposes the intimate violence of a regime that ruled not despite the border’s exceptionality, but through it.

The Poetics of Resistance and the Memory of the Border

If the imperial frontier was administratively managed through frontier governmentality and symbolically constructed through aestheticised narratives of disorder, then *The Unchosen* intervenes by generating what Schimanski and Wolfe (2017) term a poetics of the border—a literary strategy that refigures the border not as a fixed geopolitical marker but as a layered space of memory, affect, and contestation. In Riaz Hassan’s novel, the Pak-Afghan frontier is not simply a line to be crossed or defended; it becomes a traumatic borderscape, infused with the traces of colonial violence, personal loss, and unresolved histories.

At the centre of this affective borderscape stands Abdul Hakim Khan, whose fragmented recollections resist the linearity and rationality of imperial historiography. His testimony is haunted by silences, repetitions, and emotional ruptures, revealing what Aleida Assmann (2010) identifies as the dual nature of cultural memory: it is at once a site of recovery and of rupture, of continuity and of forgetting. Hakim's voice oscillates between recollection and mourning, between the desire to preserve dignity and the impossibility of full articulation. When he describes the aftermath of a British punitive expedition—"There was no sound. Even the children had forgotten how to cry. The smoke rose like questions to a God who had stopped listening" (Hassan 66)—the border is reframed not as a zone of imperial heroism, but as a devastated memorial landscape. The event, suspended between witnessing and silence, marks a psychic scar that resists closure.

This narrative technique exemplifies what Wolfe (2014) describes as the "spatial poetics" of border literature—modes of representation that map experience onto the fractured geographies of borderscapes. In *The Unchosen*, narrative time is non-linear, marked by interruptions and returns. Memory is not presented as a coherent account but as a series of affective flashpoints. In this regard, the novel participates in what Walter Benjamin (2007) terms the "moment of danger" in historical memory—the point at which remembrance becomes an act of resistance against dominant temporalities and hegemonic archives. Hakim's decision to return to his homeland—"though I was aware of the risks, I was ready to face any challenge" (Hassan, 54)—is not simply a narrative of return; it is an act of mnemonic reclamation that unsettles the epistemic violence of imperial erasure.

The contrapuntal structure of the novel reinforces this aesthetic of disorientation. Letters written by British missionaries and colonial functionaries are juxtaposed with Hakim's own emotionally charged accounts, revealing the discursive distance between coloniser and colonised. For instance, a letter from Miss Tomlinson—"I pray their souls find grace, though their minds remain shrouded in barbarity"—is placed alongside Hakim's account of a tribal boy being whipped for stealing British rations. This technique exemplifies what Schimanski (2013) calls textual thresholding—the use of juxtaposed narrative frames to generate dissonance, question authority, and trouble aesthetic boundaries. The border here is not only a thematic object; it is embedded within the very structure of the novel.

Equally significant is the novel's rendering of silence—not as absence, but as refusal. At various moments, Abdul Hakim admits that he "cannot fully remember" or "has no words for" certain events, such as the death of his father or his son's defiance. These gaps are not narrative voids but performative silences. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1994) argues, the subaltern does not always speak in legible or sanctioned languages. Sometimes, silence is the only form of articulation available within systems that demand translation into imperial logics. When Hakim finally declares, "Enough of this—there would be no more explanations" (Hassan 106), the line functions as an affective rupture—an assertion of dignity in the face of multiple regimes of power. This gesture recalls Jacques Rancière's (2004) idea of aesthetic dissensus—a refusal to inhabit the perceptual and narrative regimes assigned by dominant orders.

Memory, in *The Unchosen*, thus functions not as historical verification but as affective insurgency. Rasib Mehmood (2022) notes that Abdul Hakim's memory

“does not seek to establish facts but to reclaim dignity” (p. 176). This distinction is central to the novel’s aesthetic politics. Rather than correct the imperial record with counter-facts, Hassan constructs a memoryscape that exposes the emotional and ethical damage wrought by colonial interventions. In doing so, the novel enacts what Assmann (2010) calls restorative cultural memory—not a nostalgic idealisation, but a return to buried narratives of agency, solidarity, and resistance.

The motif of return recurs throughout the novel, functioning as both geographical and mnemonic. When Hakim recounts the moment people rallied to him—“more than two hundred families... looking up to me as their leader” (Hassan 63)—he is not merely recalling political mobilisation; he is restoring a silenced moment of tribal solidarity. The affective force of this recollection lies not in its completeness but in its invocation. As Benjamin (2007) reminds us, memory is most potent when it intervenes in the present—when it flashes up as a form of resistance at the very moment of erasure.

The *Unchosen* produces a poetics of resistance that is grounded in affective memory, narrative fragmentation, and testimonial opacity. By refusing the narrative certitudes of colonial historiography and foregrounding the partial, broken, and emotionally charged recollections of its protagonist, the novel reclaims the border as a space not of imperial order but of contested memory and historical dignity. It invites the reader not to complete the archive, but to sit with its absences.

The Janus-faced Border: Betrayal, Collaboration, and the Fragmented Tribal Self

While *The Unchosen* offers a trenchant critique of British colonial discourse and frontier governance, it also resists the temptation to romanticise tribal resistance. Instead, the novel constructs the border as a Janus-faced site—a terrain of moral ambiguity, political fragmentation, and psychic disorientation. Henk van Houtum (2010) has described borders as “Janus-faced” in that they simultaneously include and exclude, protect and expose, connect and divide (p. 132). This dual logic is not merely spatial or geopolitical; in *The Unchosen*, it penetrates the social fabric of the tribal community, producing divided loyalties and contested identities.

The character arcs of Abdul Hakim Khan, Murad Khan, Abdul Rehman, and Habibullah illustrate how imperial bordering practices do not only impose external violence, but also reconfigure internal tribal relations. Abdul Hakim, though portrayed as a principled elder, is himself implicated in the colonial order—as a member of the *jirga* and a recipient of British patronage. He is acutely aware of this contradiction: “I was appointed as a member of the *jirga*... this was the British strategy to subdue us from within” (Hassan, 74). The border’s Janus face here is not metaphorical; it registers in the doubled role of Hakim as both resister and collaborator, leader and instrument. His ambivalence exemplifies what Giorgio Agamben (2005) calls the “zone of indistinction,” where normative categories such as loyalty and betrayal collapse under the pressures of the state of exception.

Habibullah’s arc follows a different trajectory. A character who chooses to serve in the British Indian Army and is rewarded for his loyalty, he becomes a symbol of colonial assimilation. Hakim reflects bitterly: “He wore the Queen’s badge and saluted her flag. But he no longer looked us in the eyes” (Hassan, 91). The cost of this recognition is alienation. Habibullah’s transformation reveals the intimate violence of frontier governmentality—not only its capacity to discipline bodies, but its ability to produce affective dissonance and erode communal bonds. These

internal schisms are not presented as moral failures of individuals but as structural outcomes of colonial rule.

Abdul Rehman, who negotiates with British officers in an attempt to avoid collective punishment, represents a more pragmatic but no less contested form of survival. When accused of cowardice, he responds: “You call me coward... but how many funerals can you afford to attend before you ask what life is for?” (Hassan, 92). This question gestures toward what Rasib Mehmood (2022) calls “the politics of fatigue”—a condition in which prolonged exposure to structural violence leads to ethical ambiguity rather than heroic clarity (p. 178). The novel refuses to resolve this ambiguity. Instead, it renders visible the impossible choices facing those who live under regimes of coercion masquerading as autonomy.

Even Abdul Hakim, ostensibly the narrative’s moral centre, is caught in this ambivalence. His criticism of British subsidies does not prevent him from using the same networks of patronage to protect his people. As such, *The Unchosen* reveals how resistance under colonial rule often entails forms of strategic compromise. This reading aligns with Schimanski and Wolfe’s (2017) notion of border dissonance: a literary strategy that refuses the moral simplifications typically associated with nationalist or anti-colonial narratives (p. 11). Rather than present resistance as a pure and singular act, the novel depicts it as a spectrum shaped by loss, fear, coercion, and pragmatism.

These tensions are not confined to male protagonists. The novel’s female characters, though often sidelined from political decision-making, experience the emotional and material consequences of both colonial and tribal violence. When Hakim’s wife questions the cost of his resistance—“Will your pride bring him back?”—she exposes the gendered burden of heroism. Her rhetorical challenge disrupts the masculinist logic of honour that underpins both imperial and tribal systems. In another moment, when Hakim rebukes his defiant son by blaming his mother—“Your mother has brought you up badly...” (Hassan, 106)—he inadvertently reveals how women become repositories of blame in a patriarchal system strained by external domination.

The figure of Murad Khan further illustrates how the border’s Janus-faced logic extends into tribal politics. As a firebrand who denounces the jirga and religious leaders, Murad performs the role of revolutionary. Yet when the time for action arrives, he falters: “He shouted in the jirga and disappeared during the raid. Words came easy to him; duty did not” (Hassan, 90). His character arc critiques both rhetorical militancy and religious opportunism. In another scene, Murad confronts a local cleric—“Enough of this,” he roared. “No more inflammatory sermons. Don’t play politics in the name of religion” (Hassan, 108–109)—exposing internal critiques within the anti-colonial movement itself. Religious authority, far from being a monolithic force of resistance, is shown to be complicit in reproducing imperial and patriarchal power structures.

By revealing these multiple fractures—between collaborators and resisters, between men and women, between ideology and survival—*The Unchosen* deconstructs the myth of tribal unity and anti-colonial purity. It presents the Pak-Afghan border not only as a line between empires but as a textured zone of social fragmentation, where decisions are made under duress and identities are negotiated through loss. This vision aligns with Brambilla’s (2015) understanding of the borderscape as a

processual and contested field in which subjectivities are shaped, divided, and reassembled.

Ultimately, *The Unchosen* challenges both colonial archives and postcolonial nostalgias. It refuses to portray the tribal world as a timeless bastion of honour or an unblemished site of resistance. Instead, it offers a Janus-faced borderscape—a complex, contradictory, and morally unstable terrain that reveals the psychological and political cost of living in the shadow of empire. In doing so, it redefines resistance not as purity, but as perseverance through ambiguity.

Conclusion

By foregrounding the lived experiences of tribal Pashtuns under British imperial rule, *The Unchosen* offers a powerful literary intervention into the dominant discourses that have historically framed the Pak-Afghan frontier as a zone of chaos, exception, and civilisational deficit. Through its fragmented narrative, testimonial voice, and structural ambivalence, the novel produces what Schimanski and Wolfe have called a border poetics: a representational strategy that disrupts fixed spatial imaginaries and reclaims the border as a site of memory, loss, and political struggle. Hassan's novel not only exposes the logics of frontier governmentality—the colonial tactic of ruling through distance and proxies—but also reveals how these mechanisms infiltrated indigenous institutions and subjectivities. The novel constructs the border as a Janus-faced borderscape, marked by moral complexity, internal division, and layered violence. Characters such as Abdul Hakim, Abdul Rehman, and Habibullah embody the spectrum of responses to imperial domination, from resistance to accommodation, each conditioned by survival, trauma, and constrained agency.

Furthermore, *The Unchosen* renders silence and forgetting not as narrative absences but as critical forms of subaltern resistance. By refusing to speak in imperial idioms and by embracing narrative fragmentation, the text offers a profound aesthetic challenge to colonial historiography and postcolonial nostalgia alike. It insists that the memory of the border—its betrayals, compromises, and dignity—must be narrated from below, in the fractured voice of those whom history has marginalised.

In this way, the novel extends the reach of postcolonial literary studies into the domain of border aesthetics. It invites readers and scholars alike to reimagine borders not as static lines but as contested, affective, and ethically charged spaces—shaped by imperial violence, lived negotiation, and the poetics of survival.

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