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Zainul Abedin and the Afterlives of the Bengal Famine of 1943

Sanjukta Sunderason

Drawing Lines

In February 1970, Zainul Abedin (1914–1976) – the master artist of then East Pakistan (present day Bangladesh) – painted an elaborate scroll to mark the occasion of the annual harvest festival that he had organised at the Dhaka Art Institute. Abedin had been the Principal of the art institute since its inception in 1948–1949, when independent and partitioned India and Pakistan emerged out of a retreating British Empire, and what was until then East Bengal, became the new eastern wing of post-Partition Pakistan. Abedin’s scroll, sixty-five feet long in wax, black ink and watercolour, was titled *Nabanna*, the Bengali word for the festival of new harvest. It was composed in panels, like individual chapters, in seemingly three key segments. In the first, dispossessed, emaciated villagers appear trudging across a derelict landscape in faltering trails, as vultures loom over their barren villages. The second suggests a return, what art critics in Bangladesh have often titled as ‘Life in Bangladesh’ or ‘Bride Returning to Her Parent’s Home’ – a visualisation no doubt, of contained rural domesticity, while the third shows collective tilling of earth and a golden harvest; farmers resting amidst their bountiful yield, and boatmen tethering boats. Such images of struggle, labour and leisure were staples of Abedin’s repertoire, spanning both sides of Partition. *Nabanna* stands out in its framing, both internal and external, as Abedin staged an epic narrative of multiple stories in a monumental montage. Its public address was reinscribed as the artist invited exhibition visitors to sign the scroll. Once we loosen this grand frame, however, the panels of *Nabanna* reveal multiple lineages and citations, Abedin’s own repetitions and re-stagings suggest other densities – ‘shadow-lines’, as I call them – beyond the apparent story-line of harvest and a rural quotidian.
Zainul Abedin, details of the first three panels from *Nabanna*, 1970, wax, black ink and watercolour, © Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka
The exhibition of *Nabanna* in February 1970 carried a conjunctural significance. Intertwined with the lines of loss, return, sowing and reaping in the scroll, are narratives of East Pakistan’s continuing struggle for selfhood that sought time and again to wrestle self-determination from its federal centre in West Pakistan. The milieu of the exhibition was that of an accelerating momentum of popular struggle. *Nabanna* came at the turn of a year of popular resistance that had seen surging grassroots resistance in February 1969, with the distinct socialist agenda of Maulana Abdul Hamid Bhashani – the theological and peasant socialist leader of the National Awami Party (NAP). The month of February also marked the yearly memorialisation of the *Bhasha Andolon* (Language Movement) of February 1952, widely seen as the earliest invocation of cultural self-determination in the region, when Bengalis in East Pakistan fought and died for their mother tongue to be recognised as the state language of this eastern wing of Pakistan. A year before the Liberation War of the spring of 1971, that would birth Bangladesh out of a civil war and bloody genocide, the ‘Nabanna’ exhibition, and Abedin’s epic mural suggests a metaphoric harvesting of struggle, a radical moment of *becoming*, with the artist as harbinger.

Yet, despite the allegorical references to the struggles of a germane nation, *Nabanna* does not pictorialise the political struggles of East Pakistan, which since the early-1950s had marked public life in this eastern outpost, and of which Abedin himself had been a part. Enwined in this epic scroll are multiple lineages and referents, not least among which are the artist’s own trajectories of habitation, practice and journeys that lay across and beyond the ruptures of 1947. As artist, pedagogue, administrator and cultural diplomat, Abedin presents a fraught career that not only straddled cultural spheres of pre-Partition India, and after 1947, undivided Pakistan, but embodied peculiar ways in which Partition and forced migration shaped the history of mid-century modern art in India and Pakistan. More than the displacements of Partition, Abedin’s unique position here lies in the journeys, continuities and transformations he visualised. As a young academic realist artist in pre-Partition Calcutta, Abedin had already gained fame for the stark, iconic drawings he made of the victims of the notorious famine of 1943–1944, ill-famed to be ‘manmade’, that ruined vast tracts of rural Bengal. As uprooted villagers became famine victims, pouring into urban Calcutta only to languish, starve and die in the city’s streets, Abedin sketched them, becoming a beacon for other artists, and a patron of a marked turn towards social realism in these climactic closing years of anti-colonial struggle in India. In 1947, as India and Pakistan gained freedom, and people and territories were partitioned on the basis of religion, Abedin was forced to give up his teaching job at the Government School of Art in Calcutta and return to his native East Bengal. In Dhaka, he became the key initiator in the formation of the Dhaka Art Institute, and an integral part of the cultural administration of the federal government of Pakistan in Karachi. By the mid-1950s, Abedin was a highly mobile artist travelling across North America, Europe, the United Kingdom and Japan on various international fellowships from the Commonwealth, Rockefeller or Ford Foundations, as well as to the Soviet Union, Mexico and the Arab states. In 1968, he became the *Shilpacharya* in East Pakistan, and after 1971, he would go on to become the national artist of the

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4 The Eleven-Point programme released by the student alliance of Dhaka University in January 1969 against the military dictatorship of General Ayub Khan, had incorporated ‘subaltern concerns’, and Maulana Bhashani called for an alliance of students, workers and peasants around the rallying cry of economic and political change. See Peter Custers, ‘Maulana Bhashani and the Transition to Secular Politics in East Bengal’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol 47, no 2, 2010, pp 231–259.

5 It was argued by the political parties that manpower engaged in war industries and fighting on different fronts served the interest of hoarders and monopoly stockists blocking the entry of food grains in the market and thereby creating artificial shortage. Contradicting the ‘Food Availability Decline’ hypothesis of the Famine Enquiry Commission (the Woodhead Commission), Amartya Sen put forward the concept of ‘Failure of Exchange Entitlement’ to explain the crisis of 1943, arguing that rather than food shortage the famine was caused by the unequal access to food by certain sections of the rural community who were entirely dependent on the market by late colonial times, the most badly affected being agricultural, craft and fishing labourers. See Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981; also by Sen, Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, *The Political Economy of Hunger, Volume 1: Entitlement and Well-being*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1990, Paul R Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Bengal Famine of 1943–44*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1982.
Zainul Abedin, details of the last four panels from *Nabanna*, 1970, wax, black ink and watercolour, Ⓒ Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka
newly-emerged Bangladesh. Nabanna brings together, I will argue, these multiple lines traversed by Abedin. Abedin indeed becomes the author of a reconfiguration and retelling that superimposes the monumental ruptures of the Partition of 1947 – with its communal genocide and refugee influx – with another texture of displacement and habitation, struggle and arrival, using the famine of 1943 as an originary point.

Abedin’s characteristic famine sketches from 1943–1944 are, unmistakably, the point of departure in Nabanna. The very naming of the scroll seems to echo the renowned play Nabanna (New Harvest, 1944), written by the left-wing poet and writer Bijon Bhattacharya during the famine years. Famously depicting the life of a starving Bengali peasant uprooted to urban Calcutta during the great famine, the iconic production and travels of the Bhattacharya’s Nabanna had made the famine a part of the anti-imperial narrative across India, particularly from left-wing cultural forums harnessed by the newly-legalised Communist Party of India and its cultural ‘squads’ – the Indian People’s Theatre Association formed in 1943.6 In Nabanna, Abedin seems to return to the famine, to invoke a collective point of journey, foregrounding the rural narrative to the centre of the story of decolonisation. Drawing Nabanna to celebrate struggle and harvest at the crux of liberation in 1970–1971, Abedin seems to retrace his personal journey through the famine years, his subsequent journeys across Partition and a decolonising world, and now, toward another juncture of collective selfhood. Panels in the scroll carry these shadow-lines of returns, beginnings, culminations and continuities that parallel the political trails and demarcations of decolonisation. Nabanna, indeed, is Abedin’s unique storytelling of decolonisation, where he connects and retells the stories of displacements and quotidian rhythms on both sides of 1947.

Acts of storytelling, anthropologist Tim Ingold suggests, are often about lines drawn and journeys made. They involve remembering, retracing, walking along, lines emerge along these re-tracings of steps in narrative, in gestures that story-tellers make.7 The drawing of a line on a sketch map, Ingold argues, is much like telling a story:

The lines on the sketch map are formed through the gestural re-enactment of journeys actually made, to and from places that are already known for their histories of previous comings and goings... They are lines of movement. In effect, the walk of the line retraces your own walk through the terrain.8

Abedin’s close friend, and documentary film-maker Nazir Ahmed had called him ‘by nature, a story-teller’.9 If Abedin painting Nabanna is read as ‘gesture’, one that reproduces the artist’s journeys in time, space and form, then multiple movements can be identified in his drawing lines in the scroll. I will elaborate here in this article, three modes: ‘walking through’, ‘carrying across’, and ‘forging into’.

Walking Through

Famines in colonial India were not new, neither were visual depictions of hunger. From the early nineteenth century, famine-stricken villagers and
government relief distribution had appeared time and again in journalistic photographs, documentary, illustrational and satirical sketches, and in periodicals, both in the metropolis and throughout the empire. Made mostly by European artists for a predominantly Western audience, such images were dominated by the metaphor of the coloniser/colonised, the White man and his primitive ‘Other’, within a larger rhetoric of Asian ‘poverty’. So what made the Bengal famine of 1943 different?

Ian Stephens, the editor of Calcutta’s noted English daily *The Statesman* during the famine years, recollects in his memoirs, the gradual ‘arrival’ of the famine to Calcutta: the famine arrived unnoticed, he wrote, there being little strikingly unusual about the appearance of Calcutta streets till well on into the summer of 1943. The hot weather passed, the rains began before it was evident that famine had come…

By July 1943, Calcutta and other semi-urban towns were filled with the exodus of inhabitants uprooted from their villages. For the common man in the city, ‘knowing’ the arrival of the famine came from ‘seeing’ the changing sights on the streets, a dramatic transformation beyond more common sights of urban poverty. Rather than food riots or resistance from a starving mass, the monumentality of the famine lay in its spectres of suffering, as city streets bore the macabre sight of starvation deaths, piled up dead bodies in street corners, people and dogs struggling over morsels from city bins. Stephens points to the precise rupture in the urban landscape that registered the reality of the famine:

Death by famine lacks drama… horrid though it may be to say, multitudinous death from this cause looked at merely optically, regarded without emotion as a spectacle, is until the crows get at it, the rats and kites and dogs and vultures, very dry.

This visceral presence of sights of emaciation and death as part of the everyday cityscape made famine imagery a staple of artists, writers and performers. As cultural production strove to visualise hunger and displacement, art was reimagined as *testimony*, and the artist as activist. Realism was born in the streets of Calcutta, noted Burhanuddin Khan Jahangir, biographer of Abedin. In the early-1940s, Abedin was the youngest teacher at the Government School of Art in Calcutta, his finesse in drawing already establishing him as one of the most promising academic realists in the city. Originally from Mymensingh in East Bengal, Abedin had come to Calcutta in the 1930s, to train at the Government School of Art, a nineteenth-century colonial art institution committed to Western academic realist training. Since the 1930s, along with his fellow academic artists, Gobardhan Ash and Abani Sen, Abedin had begun sketching the city’s underbelly, industrial stretches, also retreating to rural outskirts, to portraying activities related to harvest and leisure, as well as tribal life and livelihood around Dumka in the Santhal Pargana division. Through the predominantly urban repertoire in their works through the 1930s, realism graduated from rigid naturalism to a social

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10 Volumes of the *The Illustrated London News, Punch, The Graphic* or the *People of India* series carry some of the noted imageries of famine in British India. The famines in the Madras Presidency in 1877 and in Ahmedabad in 1901, in particular, were depicted at length in drawings, photographs, and lithographs.


12 Paul Greenough in his influential study of the Bengal famine of 1943–1944 has established that despite official silence, the famine began first in the cyclone-ravaged Midnapore district in December 1942 and in Chittagong, exposed to Japanese bombing in January 1943. See Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal*, op cit.

13 Stephens, *Monsoon Morning*, op cit, p 184


15 Jahangir, *The Quest of Zainul Abedin*, op cit, p 32

16 The critic Jamini Kanta Sen had observed a new *satyabodh* ‘sensibility of truth’ in these artists as early as 1938. See JaminiKanta Sen, ‘Adhunik Chitrakala-i Bangla Desh’, *Vichitra*, Year XIII, No. 1, Sraban 1345 (BS) (1938).
realistic aesthetic. The famine thrust Abedin into a new form of realist visualisation, as he encountered along his daily route, those who were destitute, competing with dogs and crows for morsels from garbage bins. Abedin drew these subjects, in haste, on cheap brown paper using common ink. Such sketches ran to the hundreds, the pressure of these events and situations, as he recalls, forcing him to change his style from impressionistic watercolour and naturalist drawing into a stark expressionistic idiom – in ‘very easy yet strong lines, in somewhat geometrical patterns’.17

Abedin’s destitute subjects, appearing in monumental singularity on bleak paper, shorn of details, backdrops, thrust forth the violent alienation of destitution in the city.18 His famine drawings entered both journalistic literature like that of Ela Sen’s Darkening Days, Being a Narrative of Famine-stricken Bengal, with drawings from life by Zainul Abedin, Susil Gupta, Calcutta, first edition, 1944

Bengal Painter’s Testimony, All India Students’ Association, Calcutta, 1944

People’s War, 21 January 1945. Though a member of the Anti-fascist Writers’ and Artists’ Association in Calcutta, Abedin was not directly associated with the Communist Party, unlike Chittaprosad.

On Chittaprosad’s visual reportage from the period, see Chittaprosad’s illustrated diary, Hungry Bengal, A Tour through the Midnapur District, by Chittaprosad, in November 1943, Calcutta, 1944; Sanjoy K Mallik, Chittaprosad: A Retrospective 1915–1978, Volumes I and II, Delhi Art Gallery, New Delhi, 2011. For the politics of display that marked Chittaprosad vis-à-vis an artist outside the folds of the CPI like Abedin, see Sanjukta Sundersan, ‘As Agitator and Organiser: Chittaprosad and Art for the Communist Party of India 1941–48’, Object 13, 2011.

For a rich history of the famine and its critical displacement in the historiographies of Partition, see Jamam Mukherjee, Hungry Bengal: War, Famine and the End of Empire, Hurst, London, 2015.

As the panels in Nabanna progress from this opening scenario of dispossession, images of return and habitation begin animating a pulsating
rural quotidian: Abedin seems to walk across into a new geography and a new temporality.

Carrying Across

In the second panel in *Nabanna*, villagers seem to return with their belongings, as the images gain a lush density. Some of these imageries of labour and leisure hark back to Abedin’s pre-Partition tribal studies from Dumka. Post-Partition, Abedin developed a conscious investment in developing this rural iconography. The act of building and forming new habitations was a critical journey for artists such as Abedin whose return to Dhaka post-Partition, forced new struggles and negotiations to form new art institutions and publics in a city without such infrastructures. In *Nabanna*, the displacements of Partition appear subsumed under these citations of journeying across, in reconfigurations of habitation. This journeying carries an allegorical resonance of Abedin’s own journeys as well as that of his fellow artists, his fellow countrymen in East Pakistan.

When Abedin, along with three of his fellow-artists and colleagues from the Government School of Art in Calcutta – Qamrul Hasan, Safiuddin Ahmed and Anwarul Haque, migrated to Dhaka in 1947, they were rendered jobless, and had to seek employment as school teachers around Dhaka to make ends meet. The quandary of having no institutional support was heightened all the more by the secondary location East Pakistan occupied vis-à-vis its western counterpart. One of the main challenges ahead for these artists, displaced from their social and professional contexts of Calcutta post-Partition, was to negotiate with the new seat of the federal government of Pakistan in far-off Karachi, for budgetary allocations to allow a new art school for Dhaka. Dynamics between West and East Pakistan during their decades of cohabitation – the 1950s and 1960s – were neither of dissociation nor easy assimilation, but constructed rather along the lines of participation and negotiation, and the politics of such cultural dialogue that both built on familiar ties with the new bureaucracy formed in Karachi and pushed for new allocations. Abedin was at the centre of this negotiation of institution-making. By the early-1950s, not only was Abedin the key initiator in creating new art institutions in Dhaka, he also became an integral part of the cultural administration of the federal government of Pakistan in Karachi, using his bureaucratic location at the federal centre to facilitate cultural development for East Pakistan.

Throughout the 1950s, Abedin made conscious efforts to integrate art with the people – whether in projecting the image of the common man in art, or promoting public appreciation of art, culture and reconstruction, in both wings of postcolonial Pakistan. Abedin forms a classic example of a postcolonial ‘artist-bureaucrat’ who became integral to the formation of art institutions and public taste in the newly independent nation-states. His intermittent presence in West Pakistan was sustained by his involvement in developing a department of fine arts of the University of Peshawar, developing collections of folk art, facilitating student trips and in the documentation of archaeological sites, which tied him to the entire pedagogical apparatus that the government was trying to foster in West Pakistan. Abedin’s hybrid position as artist-bureaucrat lay at this juncture of nego-

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24 The 1950s continued these repeated measures of appeasing the government for securing grants to concretise the art institute, and in piecemeal allocations a bigger double-storied site could be arranged in 1952, and finally in 1956, a full-fledged building, planned and executed by Zainul Abedin and Mazharul Islam, one of the stalwart architects of Bangladesh. Lala Rukh Selim, ‘50 Years of the Fine Art Institute’, *Art: A Quarterly Journal*, vol 4, no 2, October–December 1998, p 7.
tiation between East and West Pakistan that informed the consolidation of the art institute and cultural sphere in Dhaka.

By the mid-1950s, Abedin was a highly mobile artist travelling across North America, Europe, the United Kingdom and Japan, on various fellowships such as the Commonwealth and Rockefeller grants. Abedin’s international travel adds another layer to his personal and public aesthetic, and directs us to the ways in which postcolonial artists such as himself – steeped in critical realism and a legacy of national-popular aesthetic – both carried the past, and inhabited a new present, across international artworlds that sought to frame them in curious ways. In 1950, Abedin visited London’s Slade School on a Commonwealth fellowship, before travelling to Brussels, Paris, Ankara, Istanbul and Venice, where he attended the UNESCO conference at the Venice Biennale of 1952. During the course of his stay in London as Commonwealth scholar at the Slade School, Abedin had two significant solo exhibitions: the first, at the Imperial Institute (which was to become the Commonwealth Institute in 1961), organised by the Royal India, Pakistan and Ceylon Society in London (3–8 December 1951); and second, supported by the Pakistan High Commission at the Berkeley Galleries (14–26 January 1952).

At the centre of Abedin’s London exhibitions were his drawings on the notorious wartime Bengal famine of 1943. His famine works had been exhibited in London in 1948, as a part of the ‘Exhibition of Art Chiefly from the Dominions of India and Pakistan’, held at the Royal Academy of Art. The space for modern art from India was modest at this exhibition. Out of the humble number of sixty-eight paintings that found their way into the selection, there was an overwhelming presence of mythological paintings, depictions of rural India, quotidian and festive scenes, some landscapes and portraits. Nestled in this spread was Abedin’s *Famine Sketch* (45.8 × 58.3 cm), its stark critique of a wartime man-made famine almost buried underneath the civilisational repertoire of the exhibition that sought to foreground the heritage and cultural pride of the former colonies in a new geopolitical frame of decolonisation. When these images were displayed again in 1951–1952, as part of Abedin’s solo exhibitions in London, their grotesque edges were more visible to a metropolitan audience. The critic Eric Newton, who would later go on to become the Director of the Commonwealth Institute in 1961, saw in Abedin’s famine works, a simple yet concentrated imagery of ‘all the grief and suffering of a terrible famine’:

These drawings of families – gaunt, dying mothers, children sharing with crows and dogs. The half-edible contents of refuse bins, families wearily moving from village to city in search of food – are symbols as well as statements. The unseen meanings of famine as well as the seen results of it are implicit in them.26

Abedin’s ‘power’ of both observing and at the same time contemplating was striking to Newton. He found in them two intermeshed mechanisms, or impulses – apparently contradictory, ‘almost impossible’:

These drawings are, in one sense, documentary: they are isolated instances, special cases, individual scraps of personal tragedy, noted down as a diarist
would note then, with extreme simplification and selection and with no easy generalizations, no dilution of tragedy into pathos. In so far as the drawings are documentary, they are occidental. Yet behind the diarist’s selective eye is the contemplative oriental mind.

This ‘dichotomy’ between observation and contemplation in Abedin’s famine drawings that Newton seemed to be struck by, marks the precise set of contradictions that inscribed the works of artists like Abedin whose realism seemed confusing to a ‘West’ eager to instead embrace his oriental identity.

It is as though an Oriental hand, holding the brush in the traditional Oriental way, and using nothing but fluent black ink and water on absorbent paper, had been guided by a European eye.

he wrote in New Values. Such comments as Newton’s also reveal challenges to the epistemic distance that held apart the colony and the metropolis. For others like Maurice Collis – the art critic of Art News and Time and Tide, Abedin’s proficiency in realism, as displayed in his famine drawings, was a strength that prepared him ‘already’ for his journey to the West. ‘That Mr. Abedin should arrive in this country already equipped in this way’, Collis gushed,

promises well for his future. Being possessed of the essential, his progress is bounded only by his powers of imagination and the discretion he shows in choosing a type of painting suitable to his personality...27

To other artists and critics like John Buckland Wright, the ‘emotional impact’ of Abedin’s starving figures worked hand in hand with what remained, ‘an abstract aesthetic composition of a very high quality’, brushwork ‘alive, direct, never purely descriptive but a recreation of the scenes in terms of sensitive pattern’, a skill Wright wanted Abedin to pursue into etching for more mass circulation.28

In the post-London years, Abedin travelled to Japan, Mexico, and to North America on a Rockefeller Foundation grant (1956–1957), followed soon after by a visit to the Soviet Union in 1961. At every point, his famine drawings remained with him, as a personal signature, or a personal story. While his famine sketches of 1943 were to mark his reputation internationally, he was critiqued both in Dhaka and Lahore for holding on to representational art in the fast-changing international scene around him. In West Pakistan, critics pointed out the repetitions in Abedin’s art, ‘a narrow specialization’ that was being displayed time and again. While lauding his lightest medium of ‘swift, bold and bare lines’ that brought out the deepest of feelings and poignancy, critics like Syed Waliullah lamented the artist’s obsession with the famine works. ‘Perhaps we have discussed too often these famine sketches which won him fame so suddenly,’ he noted, while his post-famine works revealed an absence: ‘I feel he is like a tiger who has lost all his prowess and strength in the face of merciless, full-blast drum-beating.’29 While Waliullah considered this absorption in realism

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unworthy of modernist recognition, marking the artist as a ‘victim of conflicting ideas’, others, like the historian Aziz Ahmad, complained about the appeasing policy of West Pakistan in lifting a purely representational painter like Abedin to a stature of national importance as a sop to the sensitivities of East Pakistani intellectuals.30 Abedin’s commitment to realism was a point of contention in postcolonial Dhaka. His overt stress on realism and folk imagery was increasingly being opposed by a rising trend of individualistic, non-figurative art championed by Abstract Expressionism. With his increasing dissociation from the modernist abstraction that began to dominate art production in Dhaka, Abedin’s former students – and now colleagues – within the Dhaka Art School, complained of a growing distance between them.

In post-Partition East Pakistan, Abedin was the only artist returning time and again to the famine of 1943. While his already established fame as the painter of the famine triggers such repetitions, there is a deeper commitment to realism in Abedin’s art that can be said to animate such returns. Realism was Abedin’s defining aesthetic. His lifelong commitment to realism as an artistic style not only shaped his own artistic disposition, but also the collective aesthetic he tried to forge for modern art in East Pakistan, where he combined realism and social responsiveness with an earthy pictorial language and folk-art idioms from rural Bengal. ‘Realism to him is a forthright expression’ noted Nazir Ahmed, not a ‘straightforward approach’, not ‘mere reproduction’: ‘By filtering the essentials, taking the basic and the bare minimum he creates the whole story which is told directly and spontaneously.’31 Even as Abedin experimented with linear simplifications and semi-Cubistic figurations after his first spell in the UK, Europe, and Turkey between 1952 and 1953, and post–1953, his subjects remained rural labour and leisure, the continuing rhythms of struggle and renewal. By the 1960s, Abedin can be seen to develop an almost defensive refusal to internalise the rationality of post-war Modernism. As the momentum of political resistance in East Pakistan increased through these years, the shadows of the famine became more prevalent in Abedin’s work, persisting in ever-renewing idioms the rhetoric of poverty, struggle and resilience.

Forging Into

Art historian Iftikhar Dadi identifies three inter-related streams in Abedin’s art: ‘the relationship between his “realist” and his modernist works, his valorization of the rural and the folk, and the question of the nation’.32 In the dialogues and convergences between these three, I will argue, lies the allegorical weight of Abedin’s epic works like Nabanna and another epic scroll later that year, Monpura’70. The famine and its memories are central in forging these connections in the artist’s signature repertoire. Not only were his more famous famine sketches displayed time and again at every exhibition since 1944, he himself held these close to his heart.33 The famine symbolised to him the shadows of poverty and hunger that persisted in rural Bengal despite the political rationalities and processes of decolonisation. The struggles and resilience of rural Bengal, despite forces of

30 Ibid p 36
31 Nazir Ahmed, ‘Zainul Abedin’, op cit, p 46
33 Jahanara Abedin recalls in conversation that the artist refused to sell his famine works. When, during the liberation war in 1971, the artist was fleeing to escape arrest, he is known to have held on dearly to his famine sketches. The author, in conversation with Jahanara Abedin at the Abedin residence in Shantinagar, Dhaka, May 2012.
deprivation – political, social, economic – became for Abedin the driving force of his aesthetic. In his interview with critic Hashem Khan, the artist can be seen to weave these convergences:

Art for art’s sake’ is not my faith. I believe art is for human welfare, for making life harmonious and beautiful... I say time and again that our present famine – is one less of food than of taste. This has to be eradicated. Or else, economic poverty and the poverty of taste will march in parallels. Our struggle, thus, is against both these poverties.34

Struggle – as subject, idiom and ethic – was central to Abedin’s art. Struggle runs through his works from the 1940s to his very last works, mixing elements of hunger, poverty and rural daily life. It is in this rhetoric of struggle that the famine finds another expression, where rural Bengal ceases to be an idealised space of unbroken continuity, and becomes one of survival. Hunger permeates Abedin’s works, as a subtext, as sub-soil, as peasants are shown time and again to till the land, pull bullock carts stuck in mud, dwell and celebrate a rural quotidian deeply rooted in soil. This subsoil of hunger in Abedin’s art seems to resonate with the poems of Jasimuddin, iconised as the Polli Kobi – the poet of rural Bengal. Rosa Maria Falvo cites in the recent Skira-Bengal Foundation catalogue (2012) of Abedin’s works, one poem in particular, to mark these resonances:

We who bring out food
From the depths of the earth,
We who provide food for the whole world,
Why can’t we eat, can anyone tell us?

My wife has hanged herself,
She could no longer bear hunger,
Now I plough deep into the soil
In the hope of seeing her again.

We plough the fields,
Our bosom is always flayed,
But from the field we get harvest,
None from the sacred bosom.
We shall plough no more for rice,
But to see how far it is to the graves.35

In 1954, 1957 and 1976, Abedin kept making versions of the theme of ‘struggle’ in tempera and oil. The central and oft-repeated image of a peasant struggling to push his bullock-drawn cart out of the mire, exists alongside variations where man and animals wrestle nature and fate – the crows in his famine drawings fighting refugees to peck morsels out of garbage bins, or cows and bulls in his later works fighting tethers, or struggling against storms and hail.

Critics in West Pakistan already noted this ‘passionate closeness to the soil’ in Abedin’s works in the mid–1950s.36 To them, the rural imagery had the political texture of a regional, sub-national cultural identity, as much as this was already consciously desired by artists and critics in


35 The original Bengali poem ‘O Bajan, Chal, Jai Chal Mathe Langol Baite’ has been translated here by the poet’s daughter Hasna Jasimuddin Moudud. This is cited in Rosa Maria Falvo ed, *Zainul Abedin, Series, Great Masters of Bangladesh*, with essays by Abul Monsur, Nnazul Islam and Abul Hasnat, Skira, Milan, Bengal Foundation, Dhaka, 2012.

36 Ahmad, ‘Cultural and Intellectual Trends in Pakistan’, *Middle East Journal*, vol 19, no 1, winter 1965, pp 35–44, p 42
East Pakistan. While critics like Waliullah derided Abedin for succumbing to outdated romanticisation of the ‘folk’, describing his early-1950s watercolours of the Chittagong Hill Tracts as more of ‘geographical rather than artistic interest’, or suited more to ‘an ethnologist equipped with camera and colour film’ than to a modern artist, some others like the critic Amjad Ali focussed more on assimilating Abedin’s idiom with the stylistic contours of Islamic aesthetic and the folk idiom that he saw to be an extension of the Pakistani identity of this eastern zone of Pakistan.

Abedin himself can be seen to embrace this patronage of a regional artistic language through the post-Partition years, most noted in his collection of folk art and craft as Principal of the Art Institute. Increasingly through the 1950s and the 1960s, Abedin committed himself to the collection and documentation of folk art, a substantial part of which formed the core of the Sonargaon museum after liberation. A figure of a ‘decolonial’ artist like Abedin represents indeed, the last of the mid-century modern painters in South Asia who imagined and forged artistic modernity during decolonisation via the folk, adhering to a decolonial imaginary of modern art committed to non-urban, folk sensibilities. This generation, comprised of Abedin in Bangladesh, and before him, Nandalal Bose and Jamini Roy in India, represent a distinct variation of modernism, committed to linear figurative drawing resonating non-urban, folk sensibilities. Abedin’s rejection of the urban promise of the post-colony becomes most palpable in his alternative valorisation of the rural and the locational, both overlapping in markedly political ways for East Pakistan. The persisting element of struggle in his construction of the rural remains a clue to the radical potentialities of the genre.

The rural was a political idiom for Abedin in more ways than one. Its more obvious connotations, as have been pointed out by critics and historians in both zones of postcolonial Pakistan – was one of a regional inscription of East Pakistan that served as a counter-hegemonic aesthetic against the domination of West Pakistan. The other, not yet fully explored in scholarship, is one tied to the dialectic of hunger and resilience, the famine of 1943 and its later repercussions being key here. The latter makes Abedin’s rural idiom less regional and more universal, if we read into it an alternative aesthetic of decolonisation, that strives not only to imagine the promises of a new national-modern aesthetic but a critical engagement with the corrosive trails and trials of decolonisation. The famine, I will argue, had an afterlife in Abedin’s art not only in its repetitions and journeys across his post-Partition travels, but in the radical potentialities of the rural Abedin forged in his work.

In the 1960s, Abedin returned to the stark realism he had moved away from since the 1950s. When he visited the Palestinian refugees at the invitation of the Arab League, he returned to his active, linear sketches of the famine drawings. In the ‘Palestinian War Refugee’ series of 1969–1970, his mesh of lines is more dense, a sustained chaos that seems to reflect the artist’s own troubled political belongings, as well as a return to a distinct personal language of social realism that he had not explored since the 1940s. In Nabanna, Abedin’s return to the 1940s was palpable, as well as a fuller assimilation into the burgeoning narrative of an impending nation, as popular resistance in East Pakistan was escalating towards the final battle, marking the second wave of decolonisation in South Asia.

37 Waliullah, ‘Zainul Abedin’, op cit, p 12
38 Amjad Ali, ‘Zainul Abedin: A Victim of Confused Criticism’, unpaginated. I am thankful to the artist Murtaza Baseer for drawing my attention to and providing access to Amjad Ali’s defence of Abedin against the scathing attack of Waliullah.
In 1968–1969, while Maulana Bhashani was drawn into the mass uprising and the struggles of rural peasantry, alongside that of the industrial workers and student movement of Dhaka University, Abedin’s radical folk realism in *Nabanna* echoed this harnessing of the rural and the political. The act of making the scroll itself was becoming an allegory of arrival.

*Nabanna* was followed soon after by *Manpura’70*, Abedin’s epic thirty-foot long scroll, where the shadow of the famine can be seen to return in more ways than one. When a huge coastal storm on the island of Monpura killed thousands of people in November 1970, Abedin rushed to the affected areas. The artist’s wife, Jahanara Abedin’s recollection of his disquiet in an interview is telling:

> Upon his return from Monpura, he just sat there with his head in his hands. Seeing such loss and desperation shook him from within. He didn’t paint immediately. He sat contemplating for a long while, feeling the need to do something practical to help those people. Much later, he painted scenes of what he saw in Monpura, working tirelessly…

Abedin was famed to have finished the whole thirty-foot scroll in a single day, famously photographed by Amanul Haque, a press attaché of the...
Zainul Abedin, Detail from Monpura’70, 1970, black ink and watercolour, © Bangladesh National Museum
Indian High Commission. The making of *Monpura*’70 was itself an act of resistance. Unlike Abedin’s lonely, plodding, famine drawings of 1943, with this singular first encounter with the trauma of hunger and alienation, the making of *Monpura* was an act of collective struggle. The idiom, however, is the same. The artist’s dismay too was the same, one could argue, as he struggled to visualise trauma.

The memory of decolonisation, Indian art critic Geeta Kapur argues, can sustain an anguish that can keep pushing fresh experiments in artistic sensitivity. But the memory of anguish also needs to transmute through the pulls of the contemporary. For the creative artist, she notes, tradition takes the form of memory – the memory of experiences imbibed as much as lived. This ‘emotive-intuition’, to Kapur, is ‘the artist’s most cherished and most developed quality of consciousness’:

> It is the present and the value we give to it or, shall we say, the conscience we bring to it that forms the content of both memory and imagination.  

In Abedin, this conscience is his idiom. Even in 1974, two years before his death, the artist kept returning to his famine drawings, reinventing them, using the same medium of black ink on paper in more chaotic lines. Like his *Rebel Cow* (1951) and *Struggle* (variations in 1956, 1976), hunger would recur, holding the artist in a bind that kept displacing distance from the famine years, in time and in space. Similarly, Somnath Hore in India, in whose art, the metaphor of ‘wound’ and scooped out, emaciated bodies persisted as traces and textures of the memory of famine,42 Abedin can be seen to continually try to re-work visualisations of emaciation.

These formal transmutations of the memory of hunger is captured most vividly in an oil painting by Abedin, from the Bangladesh National Museum collection at the Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin Sangrahshala at Mymensingh, reproduced for the first time in the Skira-Bengal Foundation catalogue. This painting is in itself an apt closure to this discussion. The painting resembles skeletal structures, in the absence of heads and limbs, the bare-ribbed torsos appear as abstract fragments in bleak colour – pale brown, ochre, rust and red. One could even read this painting as an abstract landscape. The citation of the painting seems to insist on this ambiguity, the striking description in the catalogue – ‘*Untitled (Unfinished)*, 1970s’43 – the best note in my view, on the afterlives of famine in Abedin’s art.

‘*Untitled (Unfinished)*’: Ambiguity as Afterlife

In his 1980 film, *Akaaler Sandhane* (In Search of Famine), director Mrinal Sen takes his protagonists through rural Bengal – a film within a film, where the film crew plods through rural Bengal looking for the ideal shooting of the famine. The crew falters, the shooting cannot continue, the past and present interlock to displace the legitimacy of historical narrative. The famine, the protagonists realise, was all around them. In a scene in the film, protagonists gather together one evening to play a

41 Geeta Kapur, *Contemporary Indian Artists*, Vikas, New Delhi, 1979, pp x–xi


43 Rosa Maria Falvo ed, *Zainul Abedin*, op cit, p 303
game of photographs: the ‘spot-the-famine’ contest, circulating images of
hunger, and guessing which ‘year’ the pictures came from. Excerpts from
the reconstructed and published script are telling, I quote here fragments
from the scene.

The protagonist, the actress Smita, holds up one picture after the other
in front of a collected crew, over tea, who are challenged to ‘Identify the
period’:

SMITA (Off voice): Tell me what period it is.
DIPANKAR (looking aside): Guess.
BUBU: Could be 1943.
RATHIN: ’43.
JOCHAN: Guess from the look of the picture? That’s not my line.
MONTU: Famine.
NILKANTHA: 1943.

SMITA: How could you guess?
DIRECTOR: He knew. I had told him.
SMITA: That’s it.
DIPANKAR: There was a mini famine in 1959. A picture from then. One
of the hunger marchers.

SMITA: This one now?
DIPANKAR: ’43.
BUBU: ’43.
RATHIN: ’43.
JOCHAN: 1959.
MONTU: ’43.
NILKANTHA: ’43.
SMITA: 1943.

SMITA: Identify this.
NILKANTHA: ’43.
MONTU: ’43.
JOCHAN: Once again?
RATHIN: This is ’43.
BUBU: Should be ’43.
DIPANKAR: What?

DIRECTOR: Bangladesh. Do you remember?

The scene then cuts to Smita holding up another picture, a plain black
noon’. Smita utters with a smile: ‘Past, present and future’.44

The confusion of the spectres of 1943 with 1971 is telling. As a
fresh round of refugees poured into India following the liberation
war in Bangladesh in 1971, the persistence of hunger and its memories
from 1943 returned. This re-living both refreshes and loosens the his-
tories of 1947. The marks of Partition become active in denser
shadow-lines of hunger and destitution that both pre-dated and contin-
ued after 1947. The ambiguities in the temporal markers of hunger in
the ‘spot the famine’ game also point towards historiographical ques-

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44 In Search of Famine: Akaler Sandhaney, A Film by
Mrinal Sen, script reconstructed and
translated by Samik
Bandyopadhyay, Calcutta,
Seagull Books, 1985,
pp 34–36
tions that need to be grappled with, if we want to understand the aesthetics of decolonisation in South Asia, particularly across (and beyond) the climactic ruptures of Partition.

The tragedy of famine had cut deep into the rural fabric of undivided Bengal. Subsumed under the still more spectacular tragedy of Partition in 1947, its scouring trails remained tied to the history of the locality, rather than the nation: in India, the 1940s and its waves of displacement and genocide were subsumed under the hegemonic sway of the modernist promise of the Nehruvian nation-state: modern art in India in the 1950s and 1960s foregrounded the citizen artist, a national-modern aesthetic that celebrated the arrival of the nation rather than its faultlines. Realism, echoing time and again the displacements of the 1940s, recurred in the art of the locality – in this case, postcolonial Calcutta, where the famine recurred in metaphors of the wound, the begging bowl, and urban decay – right into the 1970s. While East Bengal struggled to wrestle a regional political and cultural identity, visible time and time again in Abedin’s art, in West Bengal, the famine and its memories continued to generate haunting metaphors of hunger and destitution: the refugee in cultural imagination echoed the memories of both 1943 and 1947, and 1971. A spectre of violence and rupture connected them, making boundaries between past, present and future ambiguous, ‘the persistence of a present past’, as Derrida

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45 The noted artist Gulammohammed Sheikh, for instance, observed in the early-1970s, the lack of imagery in postcolonial Indian art that developed idioms to contain ‘the agony and horror of partition and the changing society of the post-Independence era oscillating between moods of apathy and unrest’. See Gulammohammed Sheikh, ‘Tradition and Modernity: Towards a More Relevant Art’, *Vrishchik*, Year 4, no 4, December 1973.
noted, a haunting of the dead that reinserts mourning in the art of the post-colony.\textsuperscript{46}

Displacement and genocide in South Asia have continued in the shadows of decolonisation. Visual art and its histories have faltered in pursuing these shadows. Often the nation-state persists as the overarching frame for studying national-modern art, or the global momentum of modernism bypasses artistic negotiations with corrosive trails of decolonisation. While it is important to study the consolidation of the ‘national’ legitimacies and signatures of national-modern art in the post-colonies, once the universalistic frames of Eurocentric, metropolitan modernism are broken down, and we shift attention towards nuances within the ‘peripheries’, we must be alert against slipping into equally universalistic frames of the national. How might we theorise the postcolonial modern in its own terms – beyond hegemonies of both globalised and nationalised narratives of modern art? The dialectic between the nation and the region becomes a potential point of entry into complicating stories of postcolonial modernisms.

The recurrences of the famine in Abedin’s repertoire, and the persistence of the memory of the famine in West Bengal, are worth unpacking. These speak of continuities across borders, also a more fluid sense of the displacements in late-colonial India. To tell a story, Tim Ingold notes, is to \textit{relate}, in narrative, the occurrences of the past, retracing a path through the world that others, recursively picking up the threads of past lives, can follow in the process of spinning out their own.\textsuperscript{47}

Historians and scholars of South Asian art have rarely pursued the possibilities of connected histories of visual art \textit{within} South Asia. Partition offers a nodal juncture for exploring potential frames.\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Nabanna} nuances these potentials at multiple scales, Abedin’s story-telling already pointing towards what Andreas Huyssen has called ‘alternative geographies’ of modernism in the formerly colonised world.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{47} Ingold, \textit{Lines}, op cit, p 85
\textsuperscript{49} Andreas Huyssen, ‘Geographies of Modernism in a Globalizing World’, \textit{New German Critique} 100, vol 34, no 1, winter 2007