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Research Article

Visual Testimony and National Memory: A Visual-Cultural Analysis of Zainul Abedin's 1943 Famine Sketches

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Abstract. The 1943 Bengal Famine stands as one of the most devastating colonial catastrophes in South Asian history, yet its visual documentation has received limited sustained attention within studies of national memory. This paper examines how Zainul Abedin's famine sketches function as forms of visual testimony in the formation of Bangladeshi national memory. Employing a qualitative visual-cultural analysis informed by testimony theory, postmemory studies, and visual culture scholarship, the study analyzes selected sketches alongside their circulation in museums, textbooks, and public discourse. The findings demonstrate that Abedin's drawings operate not merely as documentary records of suffering but as performative acts of witness-bearing that continue to shape collective remembrance of colonial trauma across generations. By tracing the transformation of these images from immediate documentation to enduring cultural symbols, this research clarifies the mechanisms through which visual culture functions as historical evidence and as a dynamic site of national memory in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: Visual Testimony, National Memory, Bengal Famine, Zainul Abedin, Postcolonial Art, Collective Memory, Trauma Representation

INTRODUCTION

In October 1943, as the Bengal Famine reached its devastating peak, Zainul Abedin—then teaching in Calcutta—set out to draw what he witnessed in the city and its surrounding landscapes. Using black ink with rapid, economical strokes on inexpensive paper, he produced the famine sketches that later became foundational images within Bangladeshi art history and memory culture (Ray, 2017; Ginwala, 2017). These drawings did not merely document the famine—they also functioned as acts of witness-bearing that continue to shape collective understanding of colonial-era trauma and national identity. The relationship between artistic representation and national memory formation has attracted increasing scholarly attention, particularly in postcolonial contexts where cultural works play crucial roles in constructing collective identity in the aftermath of political independence (Sunderason, 2017). However, existing scholarship has largely focused on textual forms of memory construction, with less attention paid to how visual works function as what Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub term "performative testimony"—cultural practices that actively create rather than simply transmit historical knowledge (Felman & Laub, 1992). This paper addresses this gap by examining how Zainul Abedin's famine sketches have functioned as sites of visual testimony that participate in the ongoing formation of national memory in Bangladesh. The central argument of this paper is that Abedin's 1943 famine sketches operate through a dual temporal logic: they function simultaneously as immediate acts of witness-bearing to colonial catastrophe and as enduring resources for postcolonial memory formation. This temporal complexity positions the drawings as what Marianne Hirsch calls "sites of postmemory"—cultural objects that facilitate identification with traumatic experiences across generational and geographical boundaries (Hirsch, 2008). Through their ongoing circulation in educational institutions, museums, and public discourse, the sketches have become integral to how Bangladeshis understand their collective past and national identity. To develop this argument, the paper first establishes a theoretical framework for understanding visual testimony as both historical documentation and memory formation. It then provides historical context for the 1943 Bengal Famine and Abedin's artistic response. The core analysis examines three representative sketches through close visual analysis and traces their circulation in postcolonial Bangladesh. The paper concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of this case study for understanding the role of visual culture in national memory formation.

RESEARCH AIM AND CONTRIBUTION

This study aims to examine how Zainul Abedin's 1943 famine sketches function as forms of visual testimony in the formation of Bangladeshi national memory. Rather than treating the sketches solely as documentary records of the Bengal Famine, the paper investigates how they operate as performative cultural artifacts that continue to shape collective remembrance of colonial trauma across historical periods. The

central research question guiding this study is: how do Abedin's famine sketches transform immediate acts of witnessing into enduring sites of national memory within a postcolonial context? While existing scholarship has discussed Abedin's famine images through stylistic, political, and institutional lenses (Sunderason, 2017), comparatively less attention has been given to how these images function within the intersecting frameworks of testimony, postmemory, and national memory. This study contributes by integrating testimony theory (Felman & Laub, 1992) and postmemory studies (Hirsch, 2008) with visual-cultural analysis, demonstrating how visual culture can act not only as a representation of historical suffering but as an active agent in the ongoing construction of collective identity in postcolonial Bangladesh.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND NOVELTY

Studies of the Bengal Famine have emphasized its political economy and the administrative decisions that converted wartime shortage into mass starvation, foregrounding colonial governance, market dynamics, and entitlement failure (Sen, 1981; Greenough, 1982; Mukherjee, 2015; Mukerjee, 2010). Contemporary official inquiry framed the crisis through administrative reporting and relief accounting, providing an additional (and politically situated) archive of the event (Government of India, 1945). This historiography clarifies the structural causes of catastrophe, but it does not by itself explain how famine is remembered and transmitted as a collective experience after decolonization; nor does it fully capture hunger as a modern historical condition that is repeatedly mediated through images and institutions (Vernon, 2007). Work on famine representation in South Asia has also examined photography, reportage, and political aesthetics, including debates about evidentiary realism, circulation, and affect. In South Asian art history, Abedin's famine drawings are widely cited as a pivotal moment of socially committed modernism and as a foundation for later institutional developments in Dhaka (Islam, 1977; Sunderason, 2017). However, these accounts often treat the sketches primarily as historical 'records' or as milestones within national art histories, leaving under-theorized the ways the images continue to operate as testimonial encounters for later viewers. Memory studies offers tools for addressing this gap. Scholarship on collective memory highlights how cultural objects stabilize shared narratives while remaining open to reactivation in new contexts (Halbwachs, 1992; Nora, 1989; Assmann, 2011). Testimony theory further suggests that witnessing is not only the communication of facts but the production of knowledge in and through reception (Felman & Laub, 1992). By bringing these approaches together, this paper advances a novelty claim: Abedin's sketches are analyzed not only as famine representations, but as durable sites of visual testimony whose institutional circulation participates in national memory formation. This account also aligns with philosophical approaches that treat witnessing as an ethical-political act inseparable from mediation and reception (Derrida, 2000).

Theoretical Framework: Visual Testimony and National Memory Testimony as Performative Practice

The theoretical foundation for this analysis draws from Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's influential reconceptualization of testimony as a performative rather than constative practice. In their seminal work *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Felman and Laub argue that bearing witness to historical trauma is not simply the communication of pre-existing knowledge but rather "the very production of knowledge" through the testimonial encounter (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 57). This understanding proves particularly relevant to massive historical catastrophes that initially "preclude their own witnessing" through the overwhelming nature of traumatic experience. The performative dimension of testimony becomes especially significant when considering how cultural works can continue to generate new forms of historical consciousness across temporal and spatial distances. Rather than evaluating testimonial works primarily on their capacity for accurate representation, the performative approach focuses on their ability to create ongoing possibilities for what Dori Laub calls "the unprecedented occurrence of a narrative" (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 57). This process is fundamentally intersubjective: both witness and audience participate in bringing traumatic events into symbolic existence through their shared engagement with testimonial materials.

Applied to visual culture, this framework suggests that images can function as sites of ongoing testimonial encounter rather than static historical documents. Visual testimony thus involves not merely the creation of images that record traumatic events, but the establishment of cultural objects that can continue to facilitate witness-bearing across different historical contexts and audiences. In visual culture theory, images are not treated as transparent windows onto events but as objects that do conceptual work, shaping what can be seen, said, and remembered (Mitchell, 1994; Belting, 1994).

Postmemory and Visual Transmission

Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory provides a second crucial theoretical resource for understanding how visual works participate in memory formation across generational boundaries. Postmemory describes "the relationship that the 'generation after' those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up" (Hirsch, 2008, p. 107). This inherited memory is transmitted "so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" while remaining marked by temporal delay and cultural mediation. Visual images play a particularly important role in postmemorial transmission because of their capacity to create what Hirsch calls "affiliative postmemory"—forms of inherited trauma connection that extend beyond direct family relationships to encompass broader cultural and political communities. Unlike textual accounts, which require active interpretation to generate meaning, visual images can seem to offer more direct access to historical experience through their indexical and iconic properties. This apparent immediacy makes them especially powerful vehicles for creating identification across temporal and geographical

boundaries. However, Hirsch also emphasizes that postmemorial transmission is characterized by "imaginative investment, projection, and creation" rather than simple inheritance (Hirsch, 2008, p. 107). Visual images involved in postmemorial processes become what she calls "screens of projection and approximation" that facilitate ongoing engagement with inherited trauma through contemporary cultural needs and desires. This understanding suggests that visual testimony functions not as fixed transmission of historical knowledge but as ongoing cultural practice that can generate new forms of meaning and identification.

National Memory and Cultural Identity

Benedict Anderson's influential analysis of nationalism as "imagined community" provides a third theoretical framework for understanding how cultural works participate in national identity formation (Anderson, 1983). Anderson emphasizes the role of print capitalism and shared cultural forms in creating possibilities for identification among people who will never meet but who come to imagine themselves as members of the same national community. This process requires what he calls "simultaneous consumption" of cultural materials that can create a sense of shared temporal experience across geographical distances. Visual culture plays a crucial role in this process of national imagination, particularly in postcolonial contexts where new nation-states must construct collective identity in the absence of long-established political institutions. As Partha Chatterjee argues, postcolonial nationalisms often rely heavily on cultural forms to create what he calls the "inner domain" of national identity—the sphere of customs, traditions, and cultural practices that can be distinguished from the "outer domain" of political and economic structures inherited from colonial rule (Chatterjee, 1993). Visual works can serve as especially powerful resources for this cultural dimension of national identity because of their capacity to create shared aesthetic experiences that can facilitate collective identification. However, the relationship between visual culture and national memory is not simply a matter of transmission from cultural producers to passive consumers. As Homi Bhabha's analysis of "the nation as narration" suggests, national identity emerges through ongoing cultural practices that must constantly negotiate between what he calls the "pedagogical" and "performative" dimensions of national discourse (Bhabha, 1990). The pedagogical dimension involves the transmission of established narratives about national identity, while the performative dimension involves the ongoing creation of national identity through contemporary cultural practices. Visual testimony can participate in both dimensions simultaneously, serving as both a repository of national narratives and site of ongoing identity construction.

Historical Context: The 1943 Bengal Famine and Colonial Catastrophe The Scope of the Disaster

The Bengal Famine of 1943–44 stands as one of the most devastating famines in recorded history, claiming an estimated 2–4 million lives in what is now Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal (Padmanabhan, 1973). The catastrophe unfolded against the backdrop of World War II, when British colonial authorities prioritized

military needs over civilian food security, creating conditions for mass starvation in one of the world's most fertile agricultural regions. As documented in Janam Mukherjee's comprehensive study *Hungry Bengal*, the famine resulted from a complex interaction of wartime policies, administrative failures, and colonial economic priorities rather than simple food shortage (Mukherjee, 2015). British authorities removed rice stocks from rural areas as part of a "denial policy" intended to prevent Japanese forces from accessing food supplies in the event of invasion. Simultaneously, urban areas like Calcutta were prioritized for food distribution to support war industries, creating massive price inflation that made food inaccessible to rural populations. The scale of suffering was unprecedented. Contemporary accounts describe scenes of mass starvation in cities and towns throughout Bengal, with families selling their possessions, abandoning their homes, and eventually dying in the streets. The colonial administration's response was widely regarded as inadequate, with relief efforts hampered by bureaucratic delays, inadequate transportation infrastructure, and persistent prioritization of military over civilian needs (Sen, 1944).

Documentation and Representation

The famine occurred at a moment of increasing global attention to wartime suffering, yet it received relatively little coverage in international media compared to other World War II catastrophes. This relative silence reflected both wartime censorship policies and what Amartya Sen has identified as the famine's character as a "man-made" disaster that revealed the inadequacies of colonial governance (Sen, 1981). British authorities had little interest in publicizing a catastrophe that demonstrated their failure to protect civilian populations under their rule. In this context of official silence and inadequate documentation, artistic representation took on particular significance as one of the few available means for recording and transmitting knowledge about the famine's human impact. Several artists and cultural workers produced powerful accounts of the disaster, including the photographer Sunil Janah, whose images—such as the widely reproduced photograph of women queuing for rice at Lake Market, Calcutta (1943)—circulated as documentary evidence of mass hunger (Ginwala, 2017). However, Zainul Abedin's contribution stands out for several reasons. First, as a resident of Bengal who witnessed the famine's unfolding over several months, Abedin had sustained access to the disaster in ways that visiting photographers and journalists did not. Second, his decision to work in ink on inexpensive materials reflected both economic necessity and aesthetic choice, creating a visual vocabulary that could capture immediate experience while remaining accessible to broader audiences. Third, his position as an art teacher provided him with institutional connections that facilitated the preservation and circulation of his work beyond the immediate crisis period.

Abedin's Artistic Response

Zainul Abedin's encounter with the famine occurred during his tenure as a drawing teacher at the Government Art School in Calcutta. Born in Kishorganj (in what is now Bangladesh) in 1914, Abedin had moved to Calcutta in 1933 to pursue artistic training and had established himself as a promising young artist specializing

in landscapes and rural scenes (Islam, 1977). The famine marked a decisive shift in his artistic practice toward what he later described as "social realism," focused on documenting the struggles of ordinary people. Working with brush and black ink on inexpensive paper available during wartime scarcity, Abedin developed a series of famine sketches executed with rapid strokes and dry-brush effects that accentuate bodily depletion and material precarity (Ginwala, 2017; Ray, 2017). The drawings were often made quickly, with gestural lines that emphasize the physical deterioration caused by prolonged starvation. Rather than treating the famine as a set of individualized portraits, many sketches distill figures into representative forms that stand for a broader social catastrophe. The immediate circulation of these drawings occurred through leftist political networks, with several works published in the Communist Party of India's newspaper *People's War* alongside articles calling for increased relief efforts. This political context shaped the initial reception of the drawings as both artistic works and documentary evidence of colonial failure. However, the drawings' significance extended beyond their immediate political function, as they provided some of the most powerful visual testimony to the famine's human cost that would remain available for future generations.

Visual Analysis: Three Famine Sketches as Sites of Testimony

To strengthen the evidentiary basis of the argument, this section pairs close reading with high-fidelity reproductions of three famine sketches executed by Zainul Abedin in 1943. As documenta 14's historical framing underscores, the Bengal Famine was structured through colonial wartime governance and unequal entitlement relations rather than simple shortage; this political economy of hunger forms the ethical horizon against which Abedin's rapid ink drawings operate as acts of witnessing (Ginwala, 2017). Across this series, Abedin's gestural idiom—quick strokes on stark surfaces—has been described as a deliberate shift from precise academic rendering toward a visual language capable of registering distress (Ray, 2017). Each case study is organized into (i) a formal analysis of line, composition, and spatial cues, and (ii) a testimonial function analysis that links visual choices to the production of historical knowledge and to later national-memory circulation.



Sketch 1: Crouching figure in extremis (1943, Famine Sketches)

Figure 1. Zainul Abedin, Untitled (1943), from the series “Famine Sketches,” Chinese ink on paper (reproduction). Source context: documenta 14 notes on Abedin's Famine Sketches (Ray, 2017).

Descriptive Overview

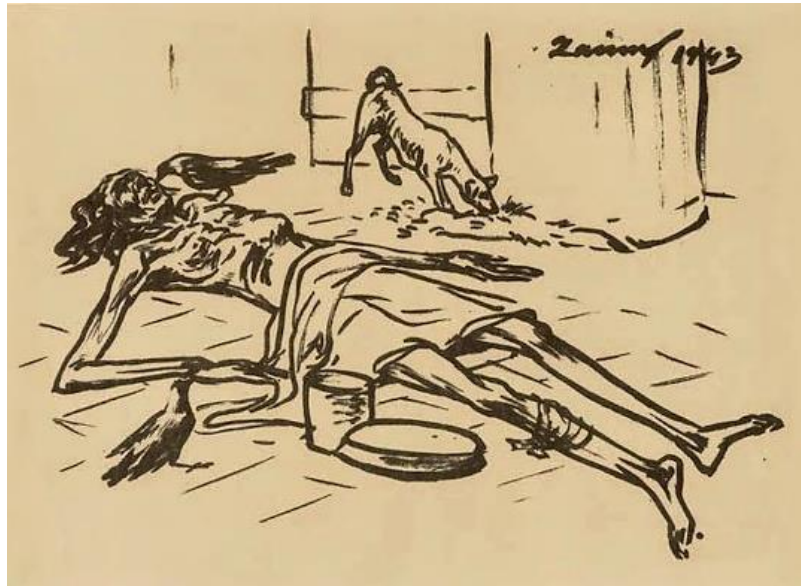
The sketch presents a lone, severely emaciated figure crouched close to the ground, knees sharply raised and torso folded inward. With minimal setting indicated, the viewer's attention is drawn to the exposed ribs, angular limbs, and the figure's hands held near the mouth, suggesting a struggle for sustenance rather than a stable scene of rest.

Formal Analysis

The composition isolates a single emaciated body in a crouched, almost fetal posture, with knees drawn up and the spine sharply articulated. Abedin's economy of line—broad, quick strokes that thicken at joints and taper along limbs—prioritizes skeletal structure over surface detail, producing a visual anatomy of starvation rather than a portrait of an individuated sitter. The figure's head tilts toward a shallow bowl, and the triangular arrangement of limbs funnels the viewer's gaze inward, intensifying a sense of confinement and exhaustion. The background is left nearly blank, interrupted only by minimal ground marks; this negative space functions as a visual analogue for deprivation, with no environmental relief or narrative distraction. The ink's tonal variation—dense at the shoulders and hands, lighter along the torso—creates a pulsing rhythm that reads as urgency, consistent with Abedin's turn to gestural shorthand to register distress during the famine.

Testimonial Function

As testimony, the drawing performs witness-bearing through its refusal of spectacle: instead of dramatizing death, it renders the body as evidence of a political condition—hunger—made visible in posture, bone, and depleted space. In Felman and Laub's sense, such testimony does not merely transmit information; it produces knowledge in the encounter between image and viewer, compelling recognition of what official wartime narratives minimized or obscured. The anonymity of the figure supports affiliative identification across generations: viewers can read the body as singular and collective at once, enabling what memory studies describe as postmemorial attachment to an event not personally lived. By compressing the scene to a body, a bowl, and a bare ground line, Abedin converts an immediate street observation into an enduring mnemonic icon—an image that can be reproduced in pedagogy and exhibition as a condensed argument about colonial vulnerability and Bengali suffering.



Sketch 2: Prone body with scavenging animals (1943, Famine Sketches)

Descriptive Overview

A human body lies extended on the ground, rendered with sparse but decisive strokes, while scavenging animals (birds and a dog) occupy the same space at the edges of the figure. The presence of an empty dish near the body and the absence of any supportive social environment establish the scene as one of abandonment and exposure.

Figure 2. Zainul Abedin, Untitled (1943), from the series “Famine Sketches,” Chinese ink on paper (reproduction). Source context: *documenta 14* / *South Magazine*, “So Many Hungers” (Ginwala, 2017).

Formal Analysis

This sketch shifts from vertical containment to a horizontal field, staging a prone, elongated body across the ground plane while birds and a dog occupy the surrounding space. The figure's extended limbs form a dominant diagonal that drags the eye from torso to feet, emphasizing collapse and immobility, whereas the animals are drawn with sharper directional strokes that suggest alert movement. Abedin uses a sparse architectural cue—an implied wall and open space—to anchor the scene in an urban exterior without developing a full setting, keeping the composition legible at a glance. The bowl placed near the body functions as a stark prop: a circular void that echoes the emptiness of the surrounding space and the futility of waiting for relief. Most striking is the relational ordering: humans are rendered inert while scavengers appear active, an inversion that visually encodes the famine's dehumanizing social breakdown through compositional hierarchy rather than narrative description. In *documenta 14*'s contextual account, the scavenging birds are described as opportunistic presences that intensify the scene's moral indictment—an interpretive cue that aligns with Abedin's compositional inversion of human and animal agency (Ginwala, 2017).

Testimonial Function

The testimonial force of this image lies in how it registers famine as a collapse of social protection—an erosion so severe that the boundary between human life and disposable matter appears to dissolve in the presence of scavengers. By presenting this collapse without explanatory text, the sketch demands that viewers supply the missing political context, thereby reactivating the event as an ethical question rather than a closed historical fact. Read alongside scholarship that treats famine as an outcome of policy, entitlement, and governance, the drawing becomes a visual indictment: it stages the body as what remains when institutional care fails. In national-memory terms, the scene operates as a portable mnemonic: its stark legibility allows it to circulate as an emblem of colonial neglect and as a warning image within later narratives of collective vulnerability. The animals are not merely descriptive; they are a rhetorical device that heightens the viewer's sense of urgency and implicates spectatorship in the politics of witnessing.

Sketch 3: Mother and children with an empty plate (1943, Famine Sketches)



Figure 3. Zainul Abedin, Family struck by famine (c. 1943), Chinese ink on paper (reproduction). Source context: British Museum collection record describing a famine-family drawing reproduced on Ela Sen's *Darkening Days* (Sen, 1944; British Museum, n.d.).

Descriptive Overview

This drawing depicts a woman moving in profile while holding an empty plate, accompanied by two visibly malnourished children—one pressed close to her side

and another carrying an infant. Abedin compresses the group into a tight cluster, emphasizing kinship under strain and the bodily proximity through which famine is endured and transmitted within the family unit.

Formal Analysis

The third sketch foregrounds relational suffering: an adult woman strides forward holding an empty plate while two children cling to her body, one draped across her hip and another partially sheltered behind her shoulder. Abedin's line alternates between decisive contour and open, unfinished marks, leaving large areas of paper visible; this incompleteness reads as both speed of execution and a formal analogue for material lack. The mother's profile is sharply defined—nose, brow, and jaw set in a forward-facing determination—while the children are rendered with softer, lighter strokes that emphasize fragility and dependence. Spatial cues are minimal (a few angular lines suggesting a wall or street edge), but the figures overlap tightly, compressing the pictorial space and producing a crowded intimacy that mirrors scarcity. The empty plate is the compositional hinge: placed at the left edge and aligned with the mother's extended arm, it creates a directional vector outward toward an implied public—an appeal embedded in form rather than narration.

Testimonial Function

As testimony, the image converts hunger into a scene of compelled address: the empty plate is not only a utensil but an evidentiary sign that turns the viewer into the implied addressee of need. The family grouping expands the ethical register beyond individual suffering, showing famine as the destruction of intergenerational security and care. Importantly, institutional records note that a famine-family drawing—rendered in Chinese ink with broad brush strokes—was reproduced on the cover of Ela Sen's 1944 book *Darkening Days*, and that the book was banned by British authorities; this documented circulation history underscores how Abedin's images functioned as counter-archives against colonial silence (Sen, 1944; British Museum, n.d.). In the paper's argument about national memory, the mother-and-children motif becomes a durable icon precisely because it is both specific and transferable: it anchors famine in recognizable kinship relations while enabling later pedagogical and museum contexts to mobilize the image as collective inheritance. The sketch thus exemplifies how visual testimony can remain active across time—continuing to produce recognition and moral pressure long after the event.

Circulation and Memory Formation: From Documentation to National Narrative

Initial Circulation (1943–1947)

The initial circulation of Abedin's famine sketches occurred through networks of political activism and cultural resistance that were emerging in response to colonial failures during the famine. Several drawings were published in *People's War*, the official organ of the Communist Party of India, alongside articles that explicitly connected the famine to broader critiques of British colonial policy (Sunderason,

2017). This political context shaped the initial reception of the sketches as both artistic works and documentary evidence of colonial violence.

Photographic Testimony and Cross-Media Context



Figure 1

Figure 4. Sunil Janah, women queuing for rice during the Bengal Famine, Lake Market, Calcutta, 1943 (photograph). Reproduced from *documenta 14*, South Magazine Issue #8, “So Many Hungers” (Ginwala, 2017).

Placing Abedin's drawn testimonies alongside contemporaneous photographic documentation clarifies both medium-specific and shared strategies of witnessing. Janah's photograph registers a public event—women organized in a ration queue—through the camera's indexical capture of bodies, spacing, and the built environment, making scarcity legible as a social arrangement rather than an isolated private experience (Sontag, 2003; Azoulay, 2008). Abedin's sketches, by contrast, often compress the field into a small number of figures and rely on reductive brushwork and selective omission to concentrate attention on bodily depletion and relational vulnerability. Read together, the photograph provides a verifiable documentary context for motifs that recur across Abedin's famine drawings—waiting, exposure in public space, and the precariousness of relief—while the sketches translate that context into an affectively charged, materially economical mode of witness-bearing (Ginwala, 2017). The sketches also circulated through informal networks of artists, writers, and intellectuals who were developing what would later be recognized as the foundation of modern Bengali cultural nationalism. Exhibitions in Calcutta and Dhaka featured Abedin's famine work alongside other examples of socially engaged art, helping to establish a tradition of artistic witness-bearing that would become central to postcolonial Bengali cultural identity. Importantly, this early circulation established the sketches' dual identity as both immediate documentary evidence and aesthetic objects suitable for artistic contemplation. Reviews from the period emphasize both the works' effectiveness as social criticism and their formal

innovation within the broader development of modern Indian art. This dual identity would prove crucial to the sketches' ongoing function as sites of memory formation, as it enabled them to serve simultaneously as historical evidence and cultural symbols.

Post-Partition Memory (1947–1971)

The partition of India in 1947 created new political contexts that reshaped the meaning and circulation of Abedin's famine sketches. As East Bengal became East Pakistan, the sketches acquired new significance as documentation of pre-partition Bengali experience that could serve as foundation for regional identity within the new Pakistani state. Abedin's move to Dhaka in 1947 and his central role in establishing the Faculty of Fine Arts at Dhaka University positioned him as a crucial figure in the development of East Pakistani cultural institutions. During this period, the sketches began to appear in educational contexts that framed them as examples of "indigenous" artistic response to colonial exploitation. Art history textbooks and museum exhibitions emphasized Abedin's status as a witness to historical catastrophe while positioning his aesthetic innovations as contributions to the development of specifically Bengali forms of artistic modernism. This educational circulation was crucial to the sketches' transformation from immediate documentation to sites of collective memory. The sketches also acquired political significance within the broader struggle for Bengali autonomy that would eventually lead to Bangladeshi independence in 1971. Cultural activists used Abedin's work to illustrate the historical suffering of the Bengali people while arguing for greater political self-determination. In this context, the famine sketches became symbols not just of colonial exploitation but of Bengali resilience and cultural distinctiveness.

Postcolonial National Memory (1971–Present)

The emergence of Bangladesh as an independent nation in 1971 created new possibilities for the incorporation of Abedin's famine sketches into official narratives of national history and identity. The new state's need to construct collective identity in the aftermath of both colonial rule and the traumatic independence war positioned cultural works like Abedin's sketches as particularly valuable resources for national memory formation. In the decades following independence, the sketches have been incorporated into multiple forms of official and unofficial memory work. They appear regularly in history textbooks that frame the 1943 famine as a foundational moment in the development of Bengali political consciousness. Museum exhibitions at the National Museum in Dhaka and the Zainul Abedin Sangrahashala (museum) in Mymensingh present the sketches as central to understanding both the colonial period and the development of Bangladeshi artistic traditions. Perhaps most significantly, the sketches have become integral to what might be called the "pedagogy of national identity" through their inclusion in school curricula and cultural education programs. Generations of Bangladeshi students have encountered these images as part of their introduction to national history, creating the kind of "simultaneous consumption" that Benedict Anderson identifies as crucial to imagined community formation (Anderson, 1983). In this educational context, the sketches

function as sites of what Marianne Hirsch calls "affiliative postmemory," enabling contemporary Bangladeshis to develop identificatory relationships with historical trauma they did not directly experience. The ongoing circulation of the sketches in digital media has further expanded their function as sites of memory formation. Online exhibitions, educational websites, and social media posts regularly feature Abedin's famine images as illustrations of Bangladeshi historical experience. This digital circulation creates new possibilities for international audiences to engage with the sketches while also providing new venues for ongoing memory work within Bangladesh itself.

Contemporary Significance: Climate, Memory, and National Identity Environmental Vulnerability and Historical Continuity

The contemporary significance of Abedin's famine sketches extends beyond their function as historical documentation to encompass ongoing concerns about environmental vulnerability and food security in Bangladesh. As a nation particularly susceptible to climate change impacts including flooding, drought, and extreme weather events, Bangladesh faces continuing challenges that create resonances with the historical experience of the 1943 famine. Contemporary discussions of climate adaptation and disaster preparedness regularly invoke the memory of the 1943 famine as a foundational experience that shaped national consciousness about environmental vulnerability. In this context, Abedin's sketches serve as visual reminders of both historical trauma and ongoing challenges, creating what might be called "anticipatory memory" that can inform contemporary policy discussions and cultural responses to environmental threats. (see Figure 5). Environmental activists and cultural commentators have increasingly used Abedin's imagery to illustrate connections between historical and contemporary forms of vulnerability. This contemporary circulation demonstrates the sketches' ongoing capacity to generate new forms of meaning and political mobilization, fulfilling the performative function that Felman and Laub identify as crucial to testimonial practice.

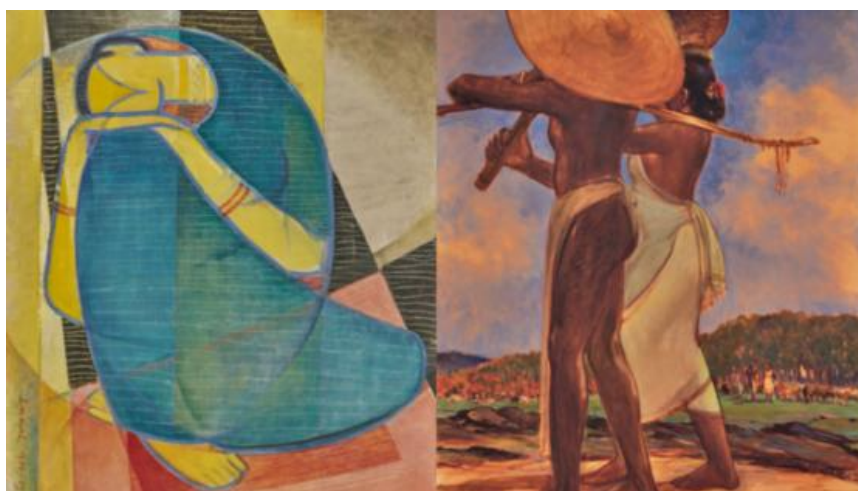


Figure 2

Figure 5. Zainul Abedin, *Santal Couples*, 1963 (reproduction). Source: The Daily Star (2024). Credit: © Rights holder(s) of the artwork and The Daily Star; reproduced here for scholarly criticism and review.

Global Recognition and Cultural Diplomacy

Recent international recognition of Abedin's work, including the record-breaking sale of one of his famine-related paintings at Sotheby's in 2023, has created new contexts for the circulation of the 1943 sketches as symbols of both artistic achievement and historical testimony. This global recognition positions the sketches within broader international conversations about art, trauma, and collective memory while reinforcing their significance within Bangladeshi national narrative. The sketches have also become important resources for cultural diplomacy, appearing in international exhibitions that present Bangladeshi artistic traditions to global audiences. In these contexts, the works function simultaneously as examples of artistic excellence and as testimony to historical experiences that can generate international sympathy and understanding for contemporary Bangladeshi concerns. This international circulation creates new challenges and opportunities for the sketches' function as sites of national memory. While global recognition reinforces their significance within Bangladeshi culture, it also raises questions about how testimonial works can maintain their specific historical and cultural meaning when they circulate in contexts removed from their original production and reception.

Theoretical Implications: Visual Testimony and Memory Studies Beyond Representation: The Performative Image

This analysis of Abedin's famine sketches contributes to broader theoretical discussions about the relationship between visual culture and historical memory. The case study demonstrates how visual works can function as what might be called "performative images" that actively participate in the construction of collective memory rather than simply representing pre-existing historical knowledge. The performative dimension of Abedin's sketches is evident in their capacity to generate new forms of identification and political mobilization across different historical contexts. Rather than serving merely as illustrations of the 1943 famine, the sketches have become active agents in ongoing processes of memory formation and identity construction within Bangladeshi culture. This performative function challenges traditional distinctions between artistic representation and historical documentation, suggesting the need for more complex theoretical frameworks that can account for the ongoing social and political work performed by cultural objects.

Postmemory and National Belonging

The case study also illuminates how Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory can be extended beyond its original focus on family transmission to encompass broader forms of cultural and national memory formation. Abedin's sketches demonstrate how visual works can facilitate what might be called "affiliative postmemory" on a national scale, creating possibilities for identificatory relationships with historical trauma among audiences who lack direct family or community connections to the original events. This national dimension of postmemory involves

complex negotiations between individual and collective identification, as contemporary Bangladeshis encounter the sketches as both artistic objects and symbols of shared historical experience. The sketches' capacity to generate this affiliative postmemory depends partly on their formal properties—their use of anonymous rather than individuated figures creates space for diverse forms of identification—and partly on their ongoing circulation through institutions that frame them as sites of national rather than merely personal memory.

Visual Culture and Postcolonial Memory

Finally, this analysis contributes to understanding how visual culture functions within postcolonial contexts where new nation-states must construct collective identity in the absence of long-established political traditions. Abedin's sketches demonstrate how artistic works created during the colonial period can be incorporated into postcolonial national narratives while maintaining their function as testimony to historical trauma. The sketches' incorporation into Bangladeshi national memory illustrates what Homi Bhabha calls the performative dimension of national narrative—the ongoing process through which national identity is constructed through contemporary cultural practices rather than simply inherited from the past (Bhabha, 1990). In this case, the sketches serve as resources for what might be called "therapeutic nationalism"—a form of collective identity formation that acknowledges historical trauma while creating possibilities for cultural resilience and political agency.

Methodology and Limitations

Methodological Approach

This study employs what might be called a "cultural biography" methodology that traces the changing meanings and functions of Abedin's famine sketches across different historical contexts and institutional settings. This approach draws from art historical methods of formal analysis, historical research into conditions of production and reception, and ethnographic attention to contemporary uses and meanings of cultural objects. The analysis combines close visual analysis of individual sketches with broader investigation of their circulation through educational institutions, museums, and public discourse. This multi-scalar approach enables examination of both the formal properties that enable the sketches to function as sites of testimony and the institutional mechanisms through which they are incorporated into collective memory formation. Primary sources for this study include the sketches themselves (accessed through museum collections and digital archives), contemporary reviews and commentary from the 1940s, educational materials and textbooks that feature the works, and museum exhibition catalogs and educational programs. Secondary sources include scholarly literature on the Bengal Famine, postcolonial art history, memory studies, and cultural nationalism. Note on images and permissions: Figures are provided to support scholarly criticism and visual verification of the analysis. Copyright remains with the respective rights holders; if the journal requires formal permission, the author will obtain it before publication.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be noted in this analysis. First, the study focuses primarily on elite cultural institutions (museums, universities, art historical discourse) and may not adequately represent more popular or informal processes of memory formation. Future research could usefully examine how Abedin's sketches function in popular cultural contexts including digital media, popular education, and community-based cultural programs. Second, the analysis is based primarily on Bangla and English-language sources, which may not capture the full range of interpretive frameworks through which different communities engage with the sketches. Future research could benefit from more multilingual and culturally diverse approaches to understanding the sketches' reception and meaning. Third, this study focuses specifically on the Bangladeshi context and may not adequately address how the sketches function within broader South Asian or international contexts of memory and cultural identity. Comparative analysis with similar cases from other postcolonial contexts could help illuminate more general patterns in how visual testimony functions within national memory formation. Finally, the study's emphasis on national memory formation may not adequately address how different communities within Bangladesh (defined by class, region, ethnicity, or other categories) engage differently with these cultural materials. Future research could usefully examine how the sketches function within subnational or transnational communities that may have different relationships to official national narratives.

CONCLUSION

This analysis of Zainul Abedin's 1943 famine sketches demonstrates how visual works can function as sites of testimony that participate actively in the formation of national memory. Rather than serving merely as illustrations of historical events, the sketches perform ongoing cultural work that enables contemporary audiences to develop identificatory relationships with collective trauma and national identity. This performative dimension of visual testimony challenges traditional distinctions between artistic representation and historical documentation while illuminating the complex processes through which cultural objects acquire and maintain significance as sites of collective memory. The case study reveals several key insights about the relationship between visual culture and national memory formation. First, visual testimony operates through what might be called a "dual temporal logic" that enables cultural objects to function simultaneously as immediate documentation and as resources for ongoing memory work. Abedin's sketches retain their indexical relationship to the 1943 famine while also serving as symbols of broader patterns of historical experience and national identity. Second, the transformation of immediate documentation into sites of national memory involves complex institutional processes that shape both the preservation and interpretation of cultural objects. The circulation of Abedin's sketches through educational institutions, museums, and public discourse has been crucial to their incorporation into Bangladeshi national narrative, while also creating new possibilities for contemporary engagement with historical trauma. Third, visual testimony can function as a form of "affiliative postmemory" that extends beyond direct family or community transmission to

encompass broader forms of cultural and political identification. The sketches' capacity to generate identification among contemporary Bangladeshis who lack direct connection to the 1943 famine demonstrates how visual works can serve as resources for collective identity formation across temporal and geographical boundaries. These insights contribute to several broader scholarly discussions. Within art history, the case study suggests the need for theoretical frameworks that can account for the ongoing social and political work performed by cultural objects rather than focusing solely on their conditions of production or formal properties. Within memory studies, it demonstrates how visual culture can serve as a vehicle for collective memory formation while also creating possibilities for contemporary political mobilization and cultural identity construction. Within postcolonial studies, it illuminates how cultural works produced during the colonial period can be incorporated into postcolonial national narratives while maintaining their function as testimony to historical trauma. The contemporary significance of Abedin's famine sketches extends beyond their function as historical documentation to encompass ongoing concerns about environmental vulnerability, cultural identity, and global recognition. As Bangladesh continues to face challenges related to climate change, economic development, and cultural preservation, the sketches serve as reminders of both historical resilience and ongoing vulnerabilities. Their recent international recognition through art market success and museum exhibitions creates new opportunities for cultural diplomacy while also raising questions about how testimonial works maintain their specific cultural significance when they circulate in global contexts. Perhaps most importantly, this study suggests that visual testimony should be understood not as a fixed form of cultural expression but as an ongoing process of cultural practice that can generate new forms of meaning and identification across different historical contexts. Abedin's sketches continue to function as sites of testimony not because they preserve unchanged meanings from the past but because they create ongoing possibilities for engagement with historical trauma and collective memory. This understanding has implications for how we approach other forms of cultural testimony, including contemporary artistic responses to ongoing forms of violence, displacement, and environmental catastrophe. The visual testimony framework developed through this analysis provides tools for understanding how images can serve simultaneously as historical evidence and as resources for ongoing cultural and political work. This framework has applications beyond the specific case of Abedin's sketches to encompass broader questions about the role of visual culture in collective memory formation, postcolonial identity construction, and contemporary responses to historical trauma.

As global communities continue to grapple with ongoing forms of violence, displacement, and environmental crisis, frameworks for understanding how cultural works can serve as sites of witness-bearing and memory formation become increasingly important. The example of Zainul Abedin's famine sketches suggests that visual testimony can serve not only as documentation of historical catastrophe but as resources for collective resilience and cultural continuity. This understanding points toward possibilities for cultural practices that can remain responsive to historical trauma while contributing to ongoing struggles for justice, recognition, and collective

flourishing. The enduring power of Abedin's sketches to generate new forms of historical consciousness and collective identification suggests that visual testimony operates according to what might be called an "economy of presence"—the capacity to make present absent realities through ongoing cultural practice rather than simple representation. This economy of presence enables cultural objects to serve as bridges between past and present, individual and collective experience, trauma and resilience. Understanding how this economy operates provides crucial resources for addressing contemporary challenges while maintaining connection to historical experience and collective memory.

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