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**Edited by Hammad Nasar and Sarah  
Victoria Turner**



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Cover image: Rubber shavings made during Bettina Fung's performance of "Towards All or Nothing (In Memory of Li Yuan-chia)" at Manchester Art Gallery, 6 March 2019.. Digital image courtesy of Bettina Fung.

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# Contents

Journeying through Modernism: Travels and Transits of East Pakistani Artists in Post-Imperial London, Lotte Hoek and Sanjukta Sunderason

# Journeying through Modernism: Travels and Transits of East Pakistani Artists in Post-Imperial London

Lotte Hoek and Sanjukta Sunderason

## Abstract

*This article explores the journeys of two key twentieth-century artists from East Pakistan—Zainul Abedin and S.M. Sultan—to and through post-imperial London in the early 1950s. Sultan’s cosmopolitan journeying, from Calcutta through Karachi and Lahore, to the USA and through London, to eventually settle in the countryside of Eastern Bengal, left traces in his practice, philosophy, and the narratives that have come to surround his work. Abedin’s London stay was both as an artist from the former colonies and as an East Pakistani cultural bureaucrat representing the post-colonial nation-state of Pakistan. These two very different journeys are approached by the co-authors from two different disciplinary traditions (anthropology and history), to bring into focus the concept of “journeys of post-colonial modernisms.” We show how the case of East Pakistan, with its incomplete decolonisation, shaped the travels and trajectories of these two artists and the ways in which their work was received and exhibited. We also show that this cannot be understood without the context of the Cold War, which facilitated particular routes for travel to and through art institutions globally, and which was to become crucial in shaping practice as well as conferring canonicity.*

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## Introduction

In the early 1950s, two artists from East Pakistan (Bangladesh, post-1971) travelled through London and showed their work there. Today, each is considered a protagonist in the story of Bangladeshi art, but back then, the routes and reception of Zainul Abedin and S.M. Sultan could hardly have been more different. Zainul Abedin, already a well-established artist and founder of the Institute of Fine Art in Dhaka, visited London's Slade School of Fine Art on a Commonwealth fellowship in 1951–1952. S.M. Sultan was a promising young artist who travelled through London in 1952 en route back to Pakistan from his study-tour to the United States sponsored by the Institute of International Education (IIE). Comparing the journeys of Abedin and Sultan through London, and their exhibition practices and critical receptions, sheds light on the question of what it meant to be a South Asian artist in newly decolonising London of the 1950s. What did London, emerging from the experiences of a second world war and in the throes of end of the British Empire, look like for artists from the newly post-colonial nation-states journeying through the spaces, galleries, and institutions of the city? The material presented in this article answers such questions in the light of the journeys of these two significant East Pakistani artists, studies of whose lives and work have remained limited, especially for this early post-colonial period.

The two individual, and often idiosyncratic, routes through London we trace here also provoke larger questions about how modernism was lived, shaped, and experienced by black artists in early post-colonial Britain, both in terms of an embodied artistic practice and as a set of institutional, personal, and artistic pathways that facilitated their movements, visibility and work.<sup>1</sup> Following Abedin and Sultan along their journeys highlights the often contradictory and complex infrastructures by which the art worlds of the newly independent Commonwealth connected with its metropolitan centre. Their journeys through the city show how certain ideals of modernism that animated its art world at the time were actualised and articulated in this early stage of London's post-colonial trajectory. These journeys provide the means by which to evaluate the possibilities and limitations offered by modernism, the infrastructures of the art world, and by the metropolis to South Asian artists in the years immediately following independence of India and Pakistan in 1947.

Following the travels of Zainul Abedin and S.M Sultan in the early 1950s London reveals the city as a crossroads where multiple modalities of post-colonial modernisms operated. It opens up the very idea of the journey as a means by which to think about the ways in which artists like Abedin and Sultan encountered and lived the trajectory of post-war and post-colonial modernism.<sup>2</sup> While laying out the particular journeys of these artists through

London, we also use the idea of the journey as a sensitising concept by which to explore infrastructures, aesthetics, and ideologies of the 1950s Commonwealth art world as it was encountered *in movement*. To do so, we first lay out briefly how we use the notion of the journey in terms of the artistic trajectories of Abedin and Sultan, as well as in terms of a passage across two disciplinary approaches that we bring to this project as authors—the approaches of history and anthropology.<sup>3</sup> Second, we detail the two journeys made by Abedin and Sultan through London. Finally, we compare these journeys to parse the economies of encounter that marked artists and artworks as they journeyed within the already hierarchised spatial politics between South Asia and Britain. We believe this early moment in the recalibration of such a hierarchical set of routes and connections between Britain and South Asia is formative of subsequent engagements by South Asian artists with British art worlds.

### ***Journeying Through***

Both Zainul Abedin and S.M. Sultan travelled *through*, rather than *to*, London. Their intentions were never to remain there and their participation in London's art worlds was temporally and spatially delimited. Nonetheless, retrospectively, these relatively brief periods of movement through London have, for both, been posited as significant and have allowed both artists to be inscribed into a larger, global narrative of (post-colonial) modernism. Our tracing of their journeys through London will illustrate that their movement through the decolonising capital was not a straightforward initiation into metropolitan modernism that was then returned to the former colony. Instead, the journey, beginning well before and continuing on from London, highlights the disjunctures in such a seamless narrative. This speaks of the nature of post-colonial modernism in its immediate post-imperial formations rather than somehow a failure on the part of these two artists to “live up” to the promises extended by this ideological and aesthetic repertoire in a newly decolonising world.

The journeys by Abedin and Sultan through London and through modernism can be seen as a constitutive part of their artistic practices. We draw on Tim Ingold's notion of making as a form of “procession”, “a passage along a path in which every step grows from the one before it and into the one following, on an itinerary that always overshoots its destination.”<sup>4</sup> We take to heart this dialectic of making and movement in our assessment of the ways in which travels through London were part of an itinerary *and* iteration for the two East Pakistani artists we discuss in this article. Given the fact that for both artists the period following the journey through London has been described as one of a certain form of absence, both sunk into the “ethnographic” or folk in different but equally un-esteemed ways: the idea of making art as a form of a journey that is inevitably one of a productive

overshooting of destinations and ends is helpful in rethinking what travel through the metropolitan centre allowed to be produced in its wake. Tracing these geographic and artistic journeys shed light on the ways in which the experience of the art world of post-war London might refract the practice of artists from countries newly liberated from British colonial rule.

This way of understanding the journey provides conceptual traction on the economies of encounter that marked artists and artworks travelling within the networks of post-war modernism. The immediate post-independence decade of the 1950s in South Asia is important here, for it captures a temporality that was both active and uneasy. A palpable internationalism defined this post-war moment that was developing under the shadow of the Cold War, when the journey itself—as travel, exchange, forums, and circulation—was seen as foundational to artistic freedom and patronage. Such values were highlighted repeatedly at international congregations. The UNESCO conferences of Beirut 1948, Florence 1950, and Paris 1951 raised the need for promoting international travel and conferences for artists in dialogue with the National Commissions.<sup>5</sup> A culmination of these efforts was UNESCO's International Conference of Artists in September 1952, planned to converge with the 26th Venice Biennale. As the conference called for "cultural co-operation ... to promote and defend the economic and social position of artists on an international level", the National Commissions were urged to promote international mobility and dialogue between artists of "all cultural backgrounds ... devoid of all considerations of propaganda."<sup>6</sup> Among the over 200 delegates and more than 150 artists representing 44 countries and 11 artists' associations across the world, was Zainul Abedin, as an official representative of the government of Pakistan.

Abedin's is an iconic example. Supported by both the Commonwealth and the Rockefeller grants, Abedin travelled across North America, Europe, the United Kingdom, and Japan in the 1950s, followed soon after by invitations from the Soviet Union where he was awarded a gold medal. By the late 1960s, Abedin returned to a more active political staging after being invited by the Arab League to visit and sketch the Palestinian guerrillas and refugees. London was, in fact, the first step into these journeys. After London, Abedin travelled to Brussels, Paris, Ankara, and Istanbul, before attending UNESCO's Venice conference. S.M. Sultan, a much more junior artist at this stage, similarly travelled through the USA in the early 1950s on a grant aimed at making artists travel internationally, supported by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundation. The momentum behind these journeys was sustained by a network of transnational art funds that invested in facilitating the travel of artists from the new post-colonial nation-states. Organisations such as the British Council, the Ford Foundation, and others actualised such ideals and objectives in opening particular routes for travel to and through art institutions globally.

Such travel intersected with localised forms and contexts of the globalised narratives of (artistic) modernism. In the UK, the Festival of Britain in 1951 had made the connection between post-war reconstruction, modernism, and a renewed place for Britain in a decolonising world. In the post-war period in Britain, “modernism now became identified with progressive liberal opinion and was easily identified with a supra-national agenda, just as abstract art ... appeared deceptively value free.”<sup>7</sup> Alongside this, as Stuart Hall has argued, artists and writers from (former) British colonies

came to London [in the 1950s and 1960s] ... to fulfil their artistic ambitions and to participate in the heady atmosphere of the most advanced centres of artistic innovation at the time. As colonials ... they came to Britain feeling that they naturally belonged to the modern movement and, in a way, it belonged to them. The promise of decolonisation fired their ambition, their sense of themselves as already “modern persons”.<sup>8</sup>

That is, the internationalism inscribed in the institutional efforts and artistic practices of modernism at mid-century ostensibly laid out an equal footing for those that Hall describes as the “first wave” of black diaspora artists in Britain. “‘Modern art’ was seen by them as an international creed, fully consistent with anti-colonialism which was regarded as intrinsic to a modern consciousness.”<sup>9</sup> Pakistani artists—already engaged with transnational intellectual, artistic, and institutional movements—participated in this creed and travelled along the infrastructures of mid-century modernism.<sup>10</sup>

Art institutions in post-war Britain, however, remained largely unresolved in the structural assimilation of the modernity of former colonies within the ways of exhibiting, narrating, or writing about “non-Western” art in the metropolis. While certain galleries, academic institutions, and critics engaged Hall’s “first wave” of artists, overall, they continued to be denied recognition and integration into the larger art establishment.<sup>11</sup> Their travels through the art world of 1950s Britain were thus marked by a viscosity, both participating in and resisting modernism’s universalising ambitions. In the travels and transits of Zainul Abedin and S.M. Sultan in the London of the early 1950s, these dialectical formations of post-colonial modernism become visible.

Abedin and Sultan were natural co-travellers on this journey into modernism described by Hall. But their brief tenure in the capital positions them outside the domain of the black diaspora artists. Instead, their London moment was part of a series of larger routes that incorporated Dhaka, Karachi, Lahore, New York, Venice, and Chicago, as well as Chittagong, Mymensingh, and Narail. It illustrates how London was part of a series of interlinked sites

through which newly decolonised subjects moved. The relations between these sites and cities was hierarchically organised yet the path through them was not necessarily one of predictable routes of ascent or descent, as our two artists will illustrate. Given the fact that for both Abedin and Sultan London was part of a journey, not a destination, tracking their movements through the city will illustrate the many complexly related infrastructures that post-colonial artists travelled through in the 1950s as well as providing a sense of how the encounter with their former Imperial capital, and its position in a chain of other sites, refracted in their onward journey.

Finally, the idea of the journey also helps stage this article as an encounter between two disciplinary positions, that of history and of anthropology. While the intersections between the disciplines of history, anthropology, and art history deserve an extensive account, here we note the methodological approaches we have combined to detail the journeys of Abedin and Sultan. The different disciplinary sensibilities and methods of history and anthropology are suitable to the artists in question and produce different accounts of the journeys they made. While the disciplines are no longer quite as distantly related as when Bernard Cohn first described our differences as those between members of different societies, some of his observations still hold true, especially as it concerns methodology. "Research in history is based on finding data; research in anthropology is based on creating data."

<sup>12</sup> Given the fact that Abedin was by the early 1950s already a well-established artist and an important figure in the art bureaucracy of Pakistan, while Sultan was anything but, and given their personal differences, with Abedin a dedicated institution builder and Sultan fundamentally a wanderer, different methodological approaches to tracing their journeys have been appropriate. Documentary evidence of Sultan's early career is very scarce, including the absence of a body of early works, while those of Abedin's movements and works are scattered and disregarded. To present their journeys, then, we draw on the strengths of our different disciplines: finding the dispersed materials that document Abedin's journey while producing the data by which Sultan's journey may be reconstructed out of fragments and putting these into context. Combined, these produce this account of the journeys, the artistic practices, and the art worlds that our two artists inhabited in the early 1950s.

## **Zainul Abedin and the Journeys of Allegory**

Abedin's London journey came on the heels of a series of journeys he had made since the late 1940s, each inscribed within the trails and momentum of decolonisation. In 1947, as the British exit from India created the new nation-states of India and Pakistan (then divided into West and East Pakistan), partitioned along religious lines in the wake of communal genocide and refugee exodus, Abedin, a Muslim artist, migrated to Dhaka—the new capital

of East Pakistan, along with three of his fellow-artists and colleagues from the Government School of Art in Calcutta—Qamrul Hasan, Safiuddin Ahmed, and Anwarul Haque. The move also uprooted these artists from their professional world at the Government School of Art in late-colonial Calcutta. They were rendered jobless, and had to seek work as schoolteachers 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 for these artists 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. As these negotiations facilitated the formation of the Dhaka Art Institute in 1948, Abedin had to shift to Karachi to join the Information and Publication Division of the Federal Government of Pakistan as Chief Designer. When he returned to Dhaka in 1949, he became Principal of the newly formed art school.<sup>13</sup> His international trips started soon after, his official status as an artist, pedagogue, and bureaucrat making these journeys quasi-official. Yet, reading this official patronage against the grain, through the sketchy information available, we uncover a curious mix of informal and formal economies that marked inevitably, even an official artist like Abedin. For instance, despite official patronage, Abedin notes that he had to transport his sketches and watercolours himself, without government support, to have them exhibited. The works then had to be smaller drawings primarily, for easier packaging. This also determined the scope of his visibility in London.<sup>14</sup>

When Zainul Abedin came to London in 1951, not only official patronage but also a pedagogical grid framed his journey. As a representative of the federal government of Pakistan, Abedin was visiting London on a Commonwealth Scholarship that sponsored his study at the Slade School of Art. In a brief published in *Commonwealth Today* magazine, art critic Eric Newton introduced Abedin as a “Pakistan Artist Studying in London”, with illustrations detailing his spell at the Slade (Fig. 1). The brief piece reveals Abedin’s pedagogical mission that was multipronged: he was supposed to have been studying fine art at the Slade under “the famous New Zealand born painter, John Buckland-Wright”; he was also supposed to have been studying “pottery and textile designing in various art centres”; and “collecting ideas” at the same time, “for the development of the Dacca Institute of Arts”.<sup>15</sup> The article’s illustrations show Abedin observing a student receiving lessons by John Buckland-Wright’s assistant R. Nuttall-Smith; sketching on the Chelsea Embankment along with the “Scots artist Miss Elizabeth Balneaves, who recently returned from a tour of Pakistan”; observing group classes on “the men’s ‘life’ classes”; as well as in discussion at the “London studio of his tutor, Mr. John Buckland-Wright, famous New Zealand-born painter, and instructor at the Slade School.”<sup>16</sup> Newton notes that over his stay, Abedin “has met, as he had hoped, many prominent British artists and has been

visiting the kind offices of Mr. Buckland-Wright, who is instructor at the Slade School of Fine Art [...].” The weight of institution-building sat as heavily on this trip as did artistic training and travel, making the visit itself that of a cultural diplomat and pedagogue, as much as of a student and artist.

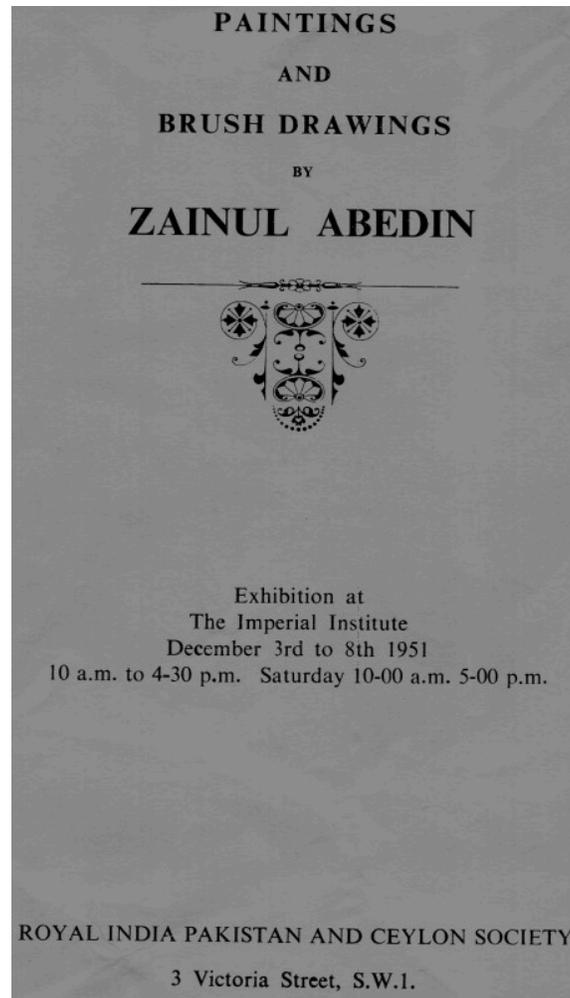


### Figure 1.

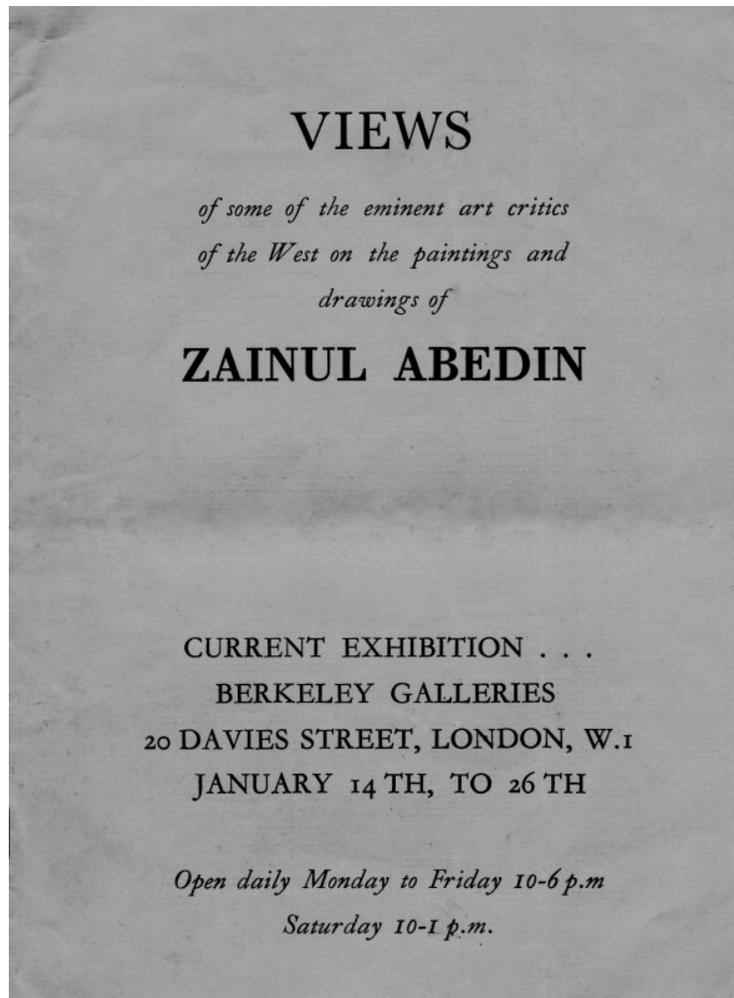
Eric Newton, Zainul Abedin: Pakistan Artist Studying in London, in *Commonwealth Today*, 1952 (London: Commonwealth Today, 1952). Digital image courtesy of Mainul Abedin.

Two significant solo exhibitions were organised during his stay, both quasi-official: 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 (Fig. 2); and the second, supported by the Pakistan High Commission and held at the Berkeley Galleries in London in 14–26 January 1952 (Fig. 3). These sites of exhibition merit some attention. The Imperial Institute was already a centre for displaying artists from the former empire, and their exhibition of Abedin, for

instance, was closely followed by “a private view of the work of the Sinhalese painter Ranjit Fernando at the Montage Gallery.” <sup>17</sup> The exhibition catalogue already announced Abedin’s official status, introducing him as being “sent by the Pakistan Government, to hold an exhibition of his work in London, and to visit the art galleries of England and France.” <sup>18</sup> The Berkeley Galleries, set up in 1941, had an energetic proprietor in William Ohly, a connoisseur, collector, and patron, who used the gallery to organise exhibitions from the “Non-West”. Here, too, he seems to have consciously maintained a curious mix of folk crafts, aboriginal arts, and modern art from the regions, often displayed in close succession. For instance, in the same year of Abedin’s exhibition, a show of Gandhara sculpture was held in July. And works by artists like Denis Williams from Sudan and Kofi Antubam from Ghana—exhibited before Abedin—were followed by exhibitions of African pottery and aboriginal sculpture. <sup>19</sup> It is worth noting that both Williams and Antubam had profiles similar to Abedin—Williams was teaching fine art in London, and Antubam was an artist, educator, and writer; Antubam’s works on labouring bodies were very close to Abedin’s own works on rural labour and leisure. <sup>20</sup>



**Figure 2.** Paintings and Brush Drawings by Zainul Abedin, The Imperial Institute, London, 3-8 December 1951, exhibition catalogue cover. Digital image courtesy of Mainul Abedin.



**Figure 3.**

Views of some of the eminent art critics of the West on the paintings and drawings of Zainul Abedin, Berkeley Galleries, London, 14-26 January 1952, exhibition catalogue cover. Digital image courtesy of Mainul Abedin.

At the centre of Abedin's London exhibitions were his drawings on the notorious wartime Bengal famine of 1943, which had already gained iconic status during the mid-1940s (Fig. 4). Since 1944, the artist—then a young and inspiring art teacher at the Calcutta art school—had been celebrated by activists and journalists as well as the Communist Party of India for his stark pen and ink sketches of hunger and displacement, in a famine manufactured by wartime profiteering and strategic lapses of the colonial government. These sketches were in a way raw trails of late-colonialism, not images sketched or photographed by travellers, artists, or cartoonists in the West, but produced from an entirely different optic, by an artist and colonial subject walking the famine-struck streets of urban Calcutta, marking in pen and ink, a radical shift towards social realism in Indian art. One of these

sketches had been exhibited at the Royal Academy exhibition of the art of India, Pakistan and Ceylon in 1947–1948, though a more substantial scale was visible for the first time during Abedin’s London shows of 1951.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 4.**

Zainul Abedin, *Untitled Famine*, Drawing, 1943. Digital image courtesy of Mainul Abedin.

Exhibited alongside those famine works were ones depicting the quotidian life of East Pakistan, for instance, *Homeward Bound*, *The Floating Market*, *Boatrace*, *After Fishing*; displayed also were some works that would become signature motifs, for instance, the bull in *Retreat*.<sup>22</sup> Eric Newton’s article noted these motifs: of the “*Pastoral Scene*,” he wrote: “Mr. Abedin specialises in water-colour painting. He works rapidly. This sketch (20 x 24 inch) took about 15 minutes to complete”; the raging bull “*Retreat*”, he wrote, was “another 15 minute sketch (20 inch by 24 inch), done with characteristic dry brush strokes” (Fig. 5).<sup>23</sup> Yet it was Abedin’s famine work that dominated his art critical reception in London, which though sparse, can be read to exemplify the ways of seeing and telling that marked post-colonial artists like Abedin in decolonising London.



**Figure 5.**

Zainul Abedin, *Retreat*, 1952, sketch in *Zainul Abedin, Paintings and Brush Drawings by Zainul Abedin*, The Imperial Institute, 3-8 December 1951. Digital image courtesy of Mainul Abedin.

Abedin's mentor at the Slade, Buckland-Wright, and the critics he would have encountered as part of that institution, framed his exhibition in a set of texts, significant for understanding the "discursive reading" of an artist like Abedin in London. Buckland-Wright wrote, for instance:

the best drawings, considered from a purely abstract graphic standpoint, have a life of their own. They are a pattern imbued with the artist's sensibility. If at the same time they re-create and strongly evoke for us the object that inspired them, they possess, not only a purely aesthetic value, but a forceful emotional power. [...] It was these two qualities that struck me forcibly in seeing Mr. Abedin's brush drawings of the famine scenes in India. The emotional impact of the starving figures is immense, and yet apart from this emotional quality what remains is an abstract aesthetic composition of a very high quality.<sup>24</sup>

To Abedin's friend, the critic Eric Newton, these sketches—"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"—were "symbols as well as statements", capturing both the "unseen meanings as well as the seen results" of the famine, his art combining a simultaneous work of observation and contemplation.<sup>25</sup> The

drawings are, Newton noted, in effect a “combination, which one has thought almost impossible, of orient and Occident.” With their documentary edge, he observed, the drawings carried occidental aesthetics, yet behind Abedin’s “selective eye is the contemplative Oriental mind”: “It is as though the 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.”<sup>26</sup> Even in his other watercolours, which had “normal life as their subject”, where “the need for urgency has disappeared”, Newton noted that while

The spacing of the main masses is Oriental, the observed fact is Oriental. Again and again the placing of each feature on the papers surface is reminiscent of Asia, yet the detail itself might have been drawn by an English water-colourist.<sup>27</sup>

This rhetoric remained a vivid category in appreciation of post-colonial artists in the metropolitan sites, their modernism never allowed in the same plane as that of the West, and displayed only within the bracket of “Oriental” art. The journeys of these artists never reduced the epistemic distance that held apart the colony and the metropolis. Moreover, the visit of artists like Abedin to the metropolis to acquaint themselves with the achievements of Western modernism were articulated as the journey of artists from the former colonies on a path from political independence to “cultural independence”. In the Introduction of Maurice Collis—the art critic of *Art News*, *Time and Tide*, Abedin was turned into a “student” of Western art:

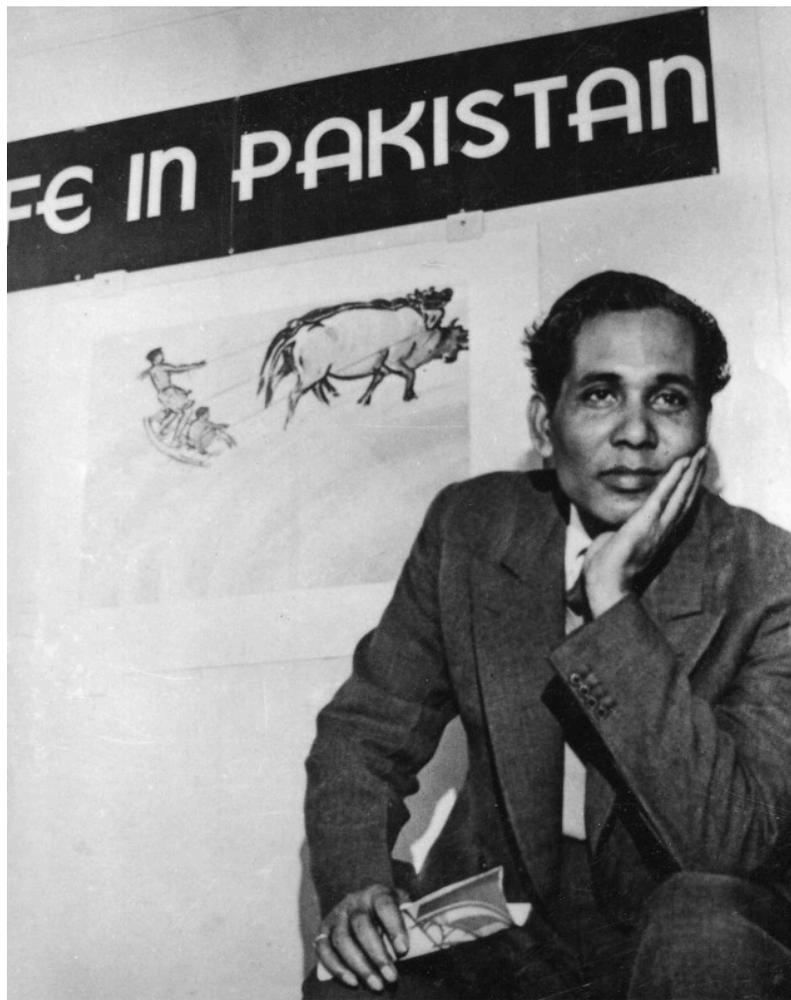
That Mr. Abedin should arrive in this country already equipped in this way promises well for his future. Being possessed of the essential, his progress is bounded only by his powers of imagination and the discretion he shows in choosing a type of painting suitable to his personality ... It is an arduous quest on which he has come, but one that is necessary if those parts of Asia which have regained their political independence are also to regain their cultural independence. The more centers of artistic autonomy there are, the more will the art of the world be enriched...<sup>28</sup>

The rhetoric of the journey was active in Collis’s reference to ideas of quest and arrival. The 1950s and the 1960s were foundational years for the new post-colonial nation-states in India and Pakistan and a period of “becoming”—that is, of institutions, apparatuses, and publics that were being formed and “put in place”, to claim a modernity which by default is

seen to arrive late in the former colonies. There is in post-colonial nation-states a recurring anxiety of “not yet”, and thus a continuous sense of “moving towards” or aspiring to a modern that has already been achieved elsewhere, in the West.<sup>29</sup> This ethic of becoming determined the teleological mechanism of framing post-colonial artists. Yet this contained celebration of Abedin as an oriental artist carrying the allegorical burden of post-colonial becoming needs to be read alongside both the politics of national allegory that marked him, in manners more nuanced, given the conflicted status of East Pakistan within the post-colonial national imagination of Pakistan. Nazir Ahmed, Abedin’s friend and admirer from his Calcutta and Dhaka days, and an employee at the BBC, introduced Abedin at the Berkeley Galleries exhibition as a visualiser of both grime and beauty: “Abedin’s works give one the emotional clue to visualize the grotesque scenes of 1943, and also to rediscover the beautiful country of our own.”<sup>30</sup> To understand Abedin, Western viewers, he noted, “will have to look through the orient’s eye”: “We love him, for he expresses our joy, our sentiments, and does it so well. If a western critic derives even a fraction of his pleasure, his endeavour to see the works of Abedin will not be in vain.”<sup>31</sup> Ahmed’s use of “we” and “our” is more than one of the solidarity of friends. They echo the “public-ness” of national allegory, Abedin’s art signifying the trials and triumphs of the collectivity—the nation as well as the state.

Abedin himself was committed to this rhetoric and its affective economies. Ever since his move to Dhaka in 1947, he made conscious efforts to integrate art with the people—whether in projecting the image of the common man in art, or promoting public access and public taste. His works from the early 1950s capture not only a struggle for survival, but also idioms of movement, labour, and leisure. By the 1950s, Abedin had become an iconic artist capturing the “life” of Pakistan’s eastern frontier (Fig. 6). Even as he idealised a rural everyday in his works, far-removed from the urban realities and aspirations of the post-colonial nation-state, the political resonances of “the people” never left his idiom. Yet, the burden of national allegory was not stable, the artist being challenged time and again for being a victim to the very publicness that iconicised him. Back home in Pakistan, Abedin was seen as “not modern enough”. As early as 1955, a prominent critic noted him as a “victim of conflicting ideas’, an artist succumbing to outdated romanticisation of the folk, slipping to journalistic drawing rather than creative form-making, his watercolours of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, for instance, carrying “geographical rather than artistic interest”, or one more suited to “an ethnologist equipped with camera and colour film” than an artist of Abedin’s stature.<sup>32</sup> The artist, the critic argued, was taken over by “constant public gaze and drum-beating”, leaving him little privacy for creative work.<sup>33</sup> For other critics, Abedin was instead a “victim of confused criticism”, for formalism was never an aesthetic criteria for Abedin; instead,

“a stamp of nativeness” is what he carried: “The familiar countries of our hills and valleys, the stance and features of our men and women, the peculiar dress and their distinct colours”, all “markedly Pakistani”.<sup>34</sup> This debate reveals, on the one hand, the tension between the demands of modernist internationalism in the post-colony and the pressures of national allegory on the post-colonial artist, beyond the inevitable allegorical subjectivity of the post-colonial artist.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, it hides, as was evident in Nazir Ahmad’s Introduction to Abedin in London, an allegorical mechanism that sought to claim Abedin’s vernacular signature as a hegemonic Pakistani identity—a process that would keep losing its political legitimacy through the 1950s and 1960s.



**Figure 6.**

Zainul Abedin, *Life in Pakistan*, 1950s, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Mainul Abedin.

A dialectic between the public and the private, and the social and the formal, forms the artistic climate within which Abedin's London trip happened. Time and again, his reviewers in London put his art under the allegorical shadow of being a Pakistani artist, or an oriental artist travelling to modernism's centres. Anxieties around public-ness in Abedin's art, and the dialectics of national allegory, are also indicative of concerns that were being aired at the UNESCO conference at Venice that Abedin had attended in 1952. The noted British sculptor, Henry Moore, was careful to warn that there existed a paradoxical relationship between the artist's freedom and his social function, between "his need for the sympathy of a people and his dependence on internal springs of inspiration."<sup>36</sup> Situated as he was at the overlapping spheres and idioms of the local, the national, and the global—artists like Abedin occupied this curious location under the shadow of the Cold War—where they travelled to and negotiated the contradictory aesthetic currents in both the Western and Eastern Bloc.

### **S.M. Sultan and the Unscripted Journey**

S.M. Sultan's international travels were also shaped by the developing cultural politics of the Cold War. The most eye-catching quality of the life and work of painter S.M. Sultan has been his reclusion in the village of Narail, Bangladesh. After a long journey to the USA and Europe in the early 1950s facilitated by American cultural institutions, he returned abruptly to rural East Pakistan, where he sequestered himself. Between the mid-1950s until his death in 1994, Sultan lived and worked in the village, realizing the now famous canvases extolling the bodies and labour of the Bengali peasantry. Like Abedin, Sultan's work and lifestyle were marked by a strong commitment to the peasant and rural forms of culture, which came to be increasingly expressed in his canvases after his retreat to Narail, and which too have been read as a form of national allegory that chose the local, particular, and figurative rather than the global, universalising, and abstract.

Sultan's charisma and eccentricity has produced an appreciation bordering on devotion, marking many accounts of his life.<sup>37</sup> Within such accounts, the life and world of Narail out of which Sultan's most famous paintings emerge, has been set off from an earlier itinerant period, consisting of a largely undocumented wandering in search of work in pre-independence India, following his abandonment of a degree at the Government School of Art in Calcutta, and a short but emphasised international journey in the early 1950s to the West.

In the accounts of Sultan's work, and particularly when his relation to modernism is discussed, Sultan's international travel is often emphasised, including the exhibition of his work in London. This journey is used to balance the idea of his quintessential "Bangladeshi-ness" with the effort to accord

him a status on a par with other internationally recognised modernist artists.<sup>38</sup> Formally, the period following the independence of British India in 1947, when Sultan held his first solo exhibition, and the mid-1950s, when Sultan left for Narail after his international travels, has been used to account for a transition within Sultan's art from figurative work, primarily landscape painting, to what has been described as his abstract art.<sup>39</sup> In critical appraisals of Sultan's development over the 1950s, this transition can be mapped. In 1952, Syed Amjad Ali writes that "ever since [the establishment of Pakistan] he [Sultan] has been painting mostly landscapes of Bengal and Kashmir."<sup>40</sup> In the May 1954 issue of *The Studio*, Jalal Uddin Ahmed notes that: "S.M. Sultan ... now seems to have gone over completely to abstract art..."<sup>41</sup> (Fig. 7). By 1958, Ahmed devotes only a brief paragraph to Sultan in his book *Contemporary Painters of Pakistan* and mentions that "he has shut himself up in a small village in Jessore ... He has not participated in any exhibition since his return from the United States, and his recent work is yet to see the light of day."<sup>42</sup> After this, Sultan largely drops out of the narrative of Pakistani art.<sup>43</sup> Instead, Sultan resurfaces as a major artist in the 1970s in what is then independent Bangladesh, and, like Abedin, he does so as a distinctly *Bangladeshi* artist, committed to its land, people, and culture, represented in his figurative oil paintings.



**Figure 7.**

S.M. Sultan, *Untitled*, 1953, in *Adam Surat: The Inner Strength* (Dhaka: Bengal Foundation, 2014). Digital image courtesy of S.M. Sultan and the Bengal Foundation.

Retrospectively, too, the years between the independence of Pakistan and Sultan's disappearance into the hinterland of Jessore, are credited with great importance. Selim notes that: "[h]e travelled widely after Partition in Pakistan, Europe and the USA."<sup>44</sup> This travel is recognised as expanding, and perhaps transforming, his style, and appears to prefigure Sultan's later importance among the Bangladeshi modernists. Sultan's international travel has been at the heart of both understanding any aesthetic transformation as well as all attempts to anchor him within an internationally recognisable pantheon of modernist masters.

However, closer inspection of Sultan's international travels reveals an evanescent archive. This is in part due to the fact that Sultan was not an established artist when he set off for the USA. In January 1952, Syed Amjad Ali describes him as "A Young Artist from East Bengal", who is on a "visit to America under the International Education Exchange programme."<sup>45</sup> That year, "the Institute [of International Education] developed and administered a project to bring young foreign artists to the United States, which was supported by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations."<sup>46</sup> During this trip, Sultan visited New York and Ann Arbor. He also spent a number of weeks in Vermont, "watching the efforts of young children. Throughout the tour, he stopped at elementary schools where he took notes of the procedures used in teaching art to children."<sup>47</sup> The teaching of children would become a strong motif in Sultan's time in Narail and clearly runs through Sultan's travel on behalf of the IIE.

The American part of Sultan's international travel was organised and timetabled by the IIE.<sup>48</sup> The London part that followed, however, was not. According to his biographer Abul Hasnat Hye, Sultan decided to stop over in London on his way home from the USA to Pakistan to "stay in London for a few days and visit a few galleries and other places."<sup>49</sup> He was to be received by his friends Khan Ataur Rahman and Fateh Lohani, fellow bohemians with a great interest in the dramatic and visual arts. Rather than a few days, Sultan stayed in London for the better part of a year.<sup>50</sup>

It is this London period, which, in its unscripted and unanticipated nature, has become retrospectively inscribed with great significance. The catalogue accompanying the 1987 exhibition of his works at the Goethe-Institut in Dhaka mentions "four exhibitions in London ... where his paintings were on display along with those of great modern Masters as Picasso, Dali, Braque, Klee."<sup>51</sup> This undocumented information is repeated extensively. The publication accompanying Tareque Masud's 1989 documentary about S.M. Sultan, lists his exhibitions and includes: "1950: Exhibition in London, Victoria Embankment, Hampstead. An exhibition of works by artists of the time. The most renowned of whom were Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dalí, Georges Braque

and Paul Klee.”<sup>52</sup> Similarly, the website *ARTNews*, in their “Top 200 collectors” list for 2015, features the influential Bangladeshi collectors Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani. Under the heading “Fun Fact”, *ARTNews* mentions that: “The first work Nadia Samdani collected was a watercolor by the Bohemian Bangladeshi modernist, SM Sultan, the only Bangladeshi artist to exhibit alongside Picasso, Dalí, and Braque at the Victoria Embankment Gardens, Hampstead, London, in 1950.”<sup>53</sup> This repeated invocation of a 1950 London exhibition equates London, modernism, and Sultan in the middle of the twentieth century. It produces exactly the sort of conditions under which Sultan’s international travel, pre-Narail, could be seen to qualitatively transform his style and provide him with the resources by which he subsequently can be categorised as one of Bangladesh’s modernist greats.  
<sup>54</sup>

Closer inspection, however, destabilises such an easy equation. In part, this is because it is unlikely that Sultan travelled to the UK before 1952; in part, it is due to the obvious conflation of two rather distinct sites in London (Hampstead and the Victoria Embankment Gardens); and in part it is due to archival traces of an exhibition at either site, including any of these artists, which quickly grow cold.

In researching Sultan’s London journeys, it becomes immediately apparent that the conflation of the two sites was probably based on Hye, who mentions that “[Sultan’s] paintings were exhibited with those of the Hampstead Victoria Embankment Sunday Artist.”<sup>55</sup> These were two different exhibition sites (Embankment Gardens and Hampstead) that ran a very similar sort of exhibition: an un-curated, “anything-goes”, open-air exhibition that attracted so-called “Sunday artists”, those who painted for pleasure, or for strictly commercial reasons. At Hampstead, the Hampstead Artists’ Council organised such shows on the weekends where anyone could come to exhibit. A sceptical contemporary noted that:

London’s other open-air exhibition, that in the Victoria Embankment Gardens, is not organised by an artists’ society but by the London County Council, a body which seems less concerned to maintain a reasonable artistic level and has kept this exhibition free-for-all. The consequence, it must be admitted, is that the few tolerable paintings are overwhelmed by a flood of nonsense...<sup>56</sup>

It is highly possible that Sultan showed, and sold, his paintings through such open-air exhibitions in 1952. When he arrived in London, his friends Fateh Lohani and Khan Aatur Rahman were staying above an Indian restaurant

called Taj Mahal, operated by Sylheti entrepreneurs.<sup>57</sup> According to Hye, the bohemian lifestyle of the friends meant a continuous drain on resources and Sultan's arrival provided a new means of income. They encouraged him to paint and sell his paintings in Underground stations. Apparently, the final settling of the bill with the restaurateur-landlord was a painting of the Taj Mahal made by Sultan for the restaurant.<sup>58</sup> When trying to gain some traction on Hye's account, Lotte Hoek met with a number of different British Sylheti men related to those who operated restaurants in the 1950s. On a number of occasions, Hoek was immediately told "I don't know where the painting is!" This illustrates both an awareness of Sultan's presence in London, and the circulation of a story of one of his paintings that survives from that period. It seems likely, however, that if Sultan painted a view of the Taj Mahal for the restaurant, it would not have been on canvas. The Bengali/Sylheti restaurants of the period were frequently decorated with extensive murals, as can still be seen in the long-standing Bangladeshi restaurants around London's Brick Lane.<sup>59</sup>

The open-air exhibitions, the selling of paintings in tube stations, and the remuneration of the landlord through a (mural?) painting of the Taj Mahal are tantalising clues about the likely contours of the art world available in post-war London to artists travelling from newly decolonised parts of the British Empire. These clues illustrate how London provided Sultan with a series of possibilities for informal modes of making, exhibiting, and selling of his work. It maps in some ways onto the period of Sultan's itinerancy in South Asia before 1947, when he would make a living selling his work to British army officers.<sup>60</sup> It shows that London provided a series of informal or semi-formal spaces for artists, delinked from the circuits of formal invitations, exhibitions, reviews, and schooling that artists such as Zainul Abedin inhabited.

Nevertheless, such informal art circuits could serendipitously link up to the formal economy of the fine arts in London. A feature of London's art world at the time, that both Sultan and Abedin visited, were large mixed shows held at commercial galleries. Summer exhibitions, mixed shows, or New Year's exhibitions would present a huge number of works from more or less established artists. The year Sultan spent in London, galleries such as the Redfern and the Leicester Galleries held such mixed exhibitions.

Mixed shows could inspire great enthusiasm in amateur or "Sunday" painters hoping for greater recognition, as is illustrated in this 1952 editorial from *The Artist*:

A number of readers have been enquiring about the Leicester Galleries Exhibition, *Artists of Fame and Promise*. In the main, exhibition at this show is by invitation from the Gallery ... If any artist wishes to be considered, he should first write to the gallery for an appointment and on no account should he send his work until requested. In fact, those who would wish to be considered for inclusion in this exhibition would be better advised to submit their work to the open exhibitions of the London societies, where their work may be noticed by the proprietors of the Leicester Galleries, who may then extend an invitation to them.<sup>61</sup>

This editorial indicates simultaneously the perhaps sometimes misplaced zeal among its readership for inclusion in the show, as well as the ways in which more and less formal modes of exhibition were linked within the broader space of London's art world. It is the latter that could be inhabited by post-colonial artists such as S.M. Sultan.

Hye makes note of an encounter between Sultan and someone connected to the formal spaces of art exhibition. "An English gentleman after looking at my works [in the open-air exhibition] said that he would like to exhibit two of my canvases at the Leicester Gallery (*sic.*)"<sup>62</sup> Here, the worlds of informal and formal exhibition intersected. Hye records Sultan saying that: "In the 1950 exhibition at the Leicester Gallery (*sic.*) my paintings were exhibited along those of Picasso, Paul Klee, Matisse and Dali."<sup>63</sup> A strong proponent of modernist art, the Leicester Galleries did exhibit Klee and Picasso in the early years of the 1950s. However, upon consultation of their catalogues, it does not appear that they showed these artists simultaneously, nor in the company of S.M. Sultan. We have not found any other mention of a group exhibition featuring these artists in London between 1950 and 1955, nor in the company of S.M. Sultan.

Going through the Leicester Galleries catalogues, however, Hoek did finally find one concrete reference to S.M. Sultan exhibiting in London in the early 1950s: in the 1952 *Artists of Fame and Promise, Part I* exhibition of July 1952. This was the exhibition that the readers of *The Artists* were so keen to be included in.

The *Artists of Fame and Promise* exhibition was an annual, two-part, summer show at the Leicester Galleries. These were large mixed shows that included many different artists, presenting oil paintings, drawings, watercolours, and sculpture in four rooms. In the 1942 edition of the exhibition, a work by Camille Pissarro was exhibited.<sup>64</sup> Evelyn Silber describes the Leicester Galleries as "one of the galleries most committed to showing contemporary

and modernist art during the twentieth century,”<sup>65</sup> in London, while simultaneously noting that “the place was characterized by comparative informality”,<sup>66</sup> with an “unpretentious, déclassé style”.<sup>67</sup> Such a perception is especially marked in contemporaneous accounts of the big summer exhibitions at the Leicester Galleries, which are described as an opportunity to “enjoy a reasonably compact miscellany”.<sup>68</sup> yet “the most agreeable of London’s mixed exhibitions, small enough to not be wearisome, thoroughly catholic, but with a high standard exercised in the choice of most of the exhibits.”<sup>69</sup>

EAST ROOM		
WATER-COLOURS AND DRAWINGS		
NO.		
146	GLYN PHILPOT, R.A. (1884-1937)	Carnaval, Nice, the car called “Sa Majesté à son harem”
147	PRUNELLA CLOUGH	Machine in gravel pit
148	DAVID SMITH	Welsh slate town
149	GUY BURN	Carcassonne
150	WILLIAM HARTWELL	Back garden in spring
151	S. M. SULTAN	Winter, Putney
152	MARY KESSELL	Bull’s head
153	VERA CUNINGHAM	St. Just
154	NINA HAMNETT	Paulina
155	OROVIDA PISSARRO	Catawaul ( <i>hand - coloured etching</i> )
156	T. B. HUXLEY-JONES	Seated figure

15

**Figure 8.**

Artists of Fame and Promise, exhibition catalogue artist listing for the East Room including *Winter Putney* by S.M. Sultan, Leicester Galleries, London, July 1952. Digital image courtesy of Ernest Brown & Phillips Ltd.

The catalogue for the July 1952 *Artists of Fame and Promise* mentions a single work by S.M. Sultan (Fig. 8)—exhibit number 151 out of a total of 203 works shown. It is titled *Winter, Putney*. From this, we might assume this was

a winter landscape, painted or drawn recently, probably not in Putney, London, but in Putney, Vermont, where Sultan had stayed as part of his US tour.<sup>70</sup> This work was hung among watercolours and drawings in the East room, where a drawing by Orovida Pissarro, Camille Pissarro's granddaughter, was also on display. Upon enquiry, I learnt that Sultan's work had been priced at 14 gns. but remained unsold.<sup>71</sup> As "the Leicester rarely bought outright from artists, relying rather on percentages on sales from exhibitions", it is likely that the work reverted to Sultan after the show.<sup>72</sup>

This has been the only concrete indication Hoek has found of Sultan having exhibited in London in the first half of the 1950s. It appears likely that Sultan did put his paintings in one or more of the "open" Sunday painters' shows around London and was subsequently invited by the Leicester Galleries to put his painting into the *Artists of Fame and Promise* exhibition. It shows that he was in London in 1952 and that he painted local scenes during his international travels. This puts some of Hye's claims in doubt, including the year of Sultan's presence in London (1952, not 1950), the type of exhibition he was in at the Leicester (not with Picasso, Klee, Matisse, and Dalí), as well as the types of subjects Sultan painted. Hye notes that Sultan said: "I made no foreign subject the theme of my work. Didn't feel the urge within. I chose all my subjects from my native land"—except perhaps for Putney, Vermont, in winter.<sup>73</sup>

Of course, none of this precludes the possibility that Sultan did exhibit among Klee and Dalí, just that there appears to be no record of this happening in London anytime between 1950 and 1955. What it does show, however, is the existence of an interlinked set of more and less formal circuits of showing and exhibiting in early post-colonial London. Off the back of a tour of the USA, organised through some of the most significant institutions whose work with South Asian artists in the early 1950s we can read within the context of a changing political and economic global environment, Sultan's London sojourn was a far less clearly itinerated mode of travel. Instead, he drew on informal networks among London-based East Pakistani students, bohemians and restaurateurs, and various art societies, amateur groups, informal exhibition sites, and roaming curators to produce, sell, and exhibit works of art that were created abroad. Much of this happened off the radar of the formal art institutions, including beyond the purview of critics, but this activity was nonetheless meaningfully connected to more formal sites of the art world, in which artists such as S.M. Sultan could appear, perhaps briefly but nonetheless prominently, among those similarly of fame and of promise. The subsequent inscriptions of these activities into art-historical or curatorial narratives tend to fix Sultan's aesthetic and geographic journeys rather than emphasise the loose constellations of junctures and movements that made up the paths through which his process of making developed.

## **“An itinerary that overshoots its destination”**

Differences between the London exhibitions of Abedin and Sultan are evident—Abedin’s official patronage contrasted with Sultan’s more informal, bohemian circuits, or Abedin’s solo exhibits contrasted with Sultan’s minor visibility in Sunday group shows, mark out the divergent institutional framings of these two artists. However, both artists shared critical similarities that are important for rethinking the aesthetic and political dynamics of these 'postcolonial journeys'. Both appeared in the former colonial metropolis in an ambivalent relation to its art worlds. Both were propelled by politically informed and formal routes that emerged as part of an unfolding cultural logic of the Cold War era yet relied on personal and affective ties. Situated at very different ends of the art worlds of London in the immediate post-colonial period, their travels can be described as part of an “itinerary that overshoots its destination.” While perhaps intended to produce a clear commitment to the international modern, both journeys overshoot this destination, encouraging in both artists a return to Bengal where the image of the peasant, in very different ways, emerges as a central trope. The rural, pastoral idiom was to gain renewed political importance through the 1960s, as East Pakistan negotiated its differential politics vis-à-vis the federal government in Karachi. Both Abedin and Sultan were to become architects of this folk-modern imaginary, which played a crucial role in producing and galvanising the political affects that fed the struggles of the 1971 Liberation War through which East Pakistan was liberated as the independent nation-state of Bangladesh.

The early 1950s form a peculiar context for East Pakistan, as artists from the region travelled under the patronage of the federal government of Pakistan, or as Pakistani artists. This required both an awareness of the tenuous relationship that the eastern wing had with West Pakistan, and a conscious exploration of a new national identity via the particularities of location and culture in the eastern wing of the country. As Abedin and Sultan were exhibiting in London in 1952, the language movement was raging in Dhaka, with students, artists, writers, political activists, and the populace itself fighting for the sovereignty of the Bengali language, against the political dominance of Urdu from the federal centre in the western wing of the country. The year 1952 was a flash point in the region’s struggle with its incomplete decolonisation, the acceleration of which over the late 1960s would lead to the Liberation War. The events in Dhaka echoed across the region as well as through the Bengali East Pakistani communities in Britain.

74

A double allegorical bind seems to mark these East Pakistani artists—one of the nation, attached in different formal and affective ways to Abedin and Sultan, as they travelled on behalf of, or selected by, the nation-state; and

the other, of location—eastern Bengal, to which both artists would return more wholeheartedly after coming back from London. Their spaces of exhibition in London are sites where this double bind can be seen to get animated—whether in the frames of viewing and narrating that mark Abedin’s formal reception, or in the informal, social grids that contain Sultan’s more peripatetic itinerary. Abedin and Sultan—like many other artists from the former colonies in 1950s London—were artists poised at the peculiar shifting grounds of modernism at the end of empire, in which questions of freedom (of the newly independent nation-state, of their artistic practice) and the affects of region and locale (recognised and misrecognised as a part of their modernist artistic practice), combined in complex ways. Tracing their journeys are for us singular exercises in sketching the particularities of the geographies of post-colonial modernisms. Their itineraries and their unforeseen destinations require an attentiveness to the dialectical instabilities that mark travelling artists, and compel us to frame their journeys beyond art-historical binaries of monolinear nationalism or zealous modernist universalism.

For Abedin and Sultan, these journeys of the early 1950s were marked not only by their rhetorical stagings as Third World artists (and therefore as a 'promise', or 'students', as artists to come good in some future) in decolonising spaces like London, but also some very personal rejections from the artists themselves. Abedin’s realistic, representative language had changed, though mildly and for a short span, after he returned from his first spell in the UK, Europe, and Turkey between 1952–1953. Post-1953, he can be seen to experiment in linear simplifications, breaking up the image and trying out semi-Cubistic figurations. What is critical to note in these images is that his subjects remain the same—peasants, labours, domestic subjects (like mother and child)—though the artist seems momentarily lured by a language of modernism while holding on to a commitment to the rural. Similarly, subsequent to London, Sultan’s earlier profusion of landscapes is transformed into a commitment to the peasantry that inhabits and constitutes that landscape, presented in organic forms. These are curious instances of a national-popular modernity that both an artist-pedagogue like Abedin and an artist-recluse like Sultan grappled with. It can almost be seen to signify a transitional aesthetic in the post-colony, where modernity is hinged between context and the universal. In Abedin’s case, this was between the image of a peasant and that of Cubism. Abedin symbolised a regional artistic language, which could be framed repeatedly as a regional signature of East Pakistan in Pakistani modern art, wherever these were exhibited. The celebration of Sultan’s peasant images subsequent to the emergence of independent Bangladesh illustrates how this form of a modernist-rural as the recognisable 'regional signature' of what was previously East Pakistan comes to be placed centre stage in the cultural narratives and imagery of the new nation-state of Bangladesh.

A certain disquiet about the reappraisal of the folk, of the ethnographic, and of the figurative in the works of both Abedin and Sultan can be discerned in critiques of their work subsequent to their journeys through London. Abedin's overt stress on realism and folk imagery was increasingly being opposed by his students, with a rising trend of individualistic, non-figurative art championed by Abstract Expressionism. One of his students, the artist Aminul Islam, notes that after Abedin returned from the UK—and even after attending the UNESCO conference and Venice Biennial of 1952—he did not take any initiative in establishing the International Artists Association.<sup>75</sup> For Abedin, a return to his pre-London idiom was marked by an almost defensive refusal to internalise a rationality of post-war modernism. His rejection became stronger through the 1960s:

“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.<sup>76</sup>

The famine of 1943 recurs in Abedin's art—in idiom and narrative, in memory and metaphor. When, on the eve of the Liberation War, Abedin drew his monumental scroll—*Nabanna* (1969) and after a devastating cyclone of 1970, *Manpura'70*—the impulse towards memorialising and storytelling could be seen to be taking over the momentum of modernist universalism. The instability of national allegory too becomes palpable through the 1960s, with his recurring imagery of the recalcitrant bull assuming increasingly the allegory of political revolt in images like *Rebellion*, that suggested return to realism to capture political discontent in the post-colony. Similarly, Sultan was dismissive of non-figurative art because of its lack of connection to the people. Speaking in the 1980s, he noted that: “most drawing rooms have an abstract painting on the wall. ... But in my eyes these works are not important because general people can't easily grasp them.”<sup>77</sup> As he said, “the modernist trend which we have today is taking us away from the soil, from our roots” (Fig. 9).<sup>78</sup>



**Figure 9.**

S.M. Sultan painting at home in Narail, film still, in *Adam Surat: The Inner Strength* (Dhaka: Bengal Foundation, 2014). Digital image courtesy of Adam Surat and the Bengal Foundation.

While the embedding of Abedin and Sultan within a predictable modernist narrative has been urgent both on the part of collectors and historians, their travels through London complicate such accounts: as their works refract through the multi-layered art worlds of London, they become parts of a potentiality that resides in an unfolding logic of post-colonial modernism. What characterises this potentiality is not only asymmetrical journeys and allegorical burdens of the post-colonial artist in the post-war metropole, but dialectical nationalisms *within* the new post-colonial nation-states. If to follow global modernisms, new “alternate geographies”<sup>79</sup> need to be charted—in archives, trails, and writings—these pursuits need to happen along non-linear, asymmetric journeys in which the folkloric or ethnographic follows abstraction or the focus on children’s art practices emerges out of Rockefeller Foundation funded travel.

The problem of narrating decolonisation is central here, and casts a shadow over the journeys and momentum of post-colonial modernism. Research on Cold War cultural politics in the United States has argued for unpacking how modernism as a formal and ideological language simultaneously transcended and reified national boundaries.<sup>80</sup> This simultaneous and contradictory mechanism of the universal and the particular were visible in the ways in which the London exhibitions of Abedin and Sultan were framed. Like the

post-colonial journeys of these artists, trails of decolonisation also overshoot the destination of post-colonial 'arrival'. Beyond its assumed linear teleology that charts political 'transfer of power' from empire to the post-colony, decolonisation needs to be read as “a complex dialectical intersection of competing views and claims over colonial pasts, transitional presents, and inchoate futures.”<sup>81</sup> While it tends to lend itself to blanket historical use across post-colonial contexts, decolonisation needs to be read as “a *situated* process that requires attention to local case-studies as well as broader patterns of event and meaning across space and time.”<sup>82</sup> The particular journeys of Zainul Abedin and S.M. Sultan show the push towards the ethnographic and the local that are latent in modernisms' global trajectory. Their travels illustrate how productive London was as a site of *particular* forms of modernism through which post-colonial artists could travel on their trajectories to those unstable edges of what post-colonial modernism could become.

## Footnotes

- 1 Projects like *Black Artists and Modernism*, for instance, have begun the archival and theoretical work around documenting artists of African and Asian descent in twentieth-century British art: <http://www.blackartistsmodernism.co.uk/about/>. Accessed 20 July 2019.
- 2 This study contributes to expanding literature that studies interfaces of modernism and decolonisation in the Global South. See for instance, Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Rebecca Brown, *Art for Modern India, 1947-1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Sonal Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930-1990* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015).
- 3 Of the two authors, Lotte Hoek is a media anthropologist and Sanjukta Sunderason is a historian of twentieth-century art and aesthetics, both specialising in cultural forms and their political, social, and intellectual lives in South Asia.
- 4 Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013), 45.
- 5 *The Artist in Modern Society*, International Conference of Artists, Venice, 22-28 September 1952 (Paris: UNESCO, 1954), 7.
- 6 N.C. Mehta, “Report from the Resolutions Committee”, *The Artist in Modern Society: Essays and Statements Collected by UNESCO* (Paris: UNESCO, 1954), 126.
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- 43 For example, Salima Hashmi and Quddus Mirza, *50 Years of Visual Art in Pakistan* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1997).
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- 47 Muriel Clafin, "Pakistani Artist Visits Graduate Student at 'U'." *The Michigan Daily*, 4 January 1952, 6.

- 48 Hasnat Abdul Hye, *Sultan*, trans. Kabir Chowdhury (Dhaka: Adorn Publications, 2008), 247–253. However, Sultan’s journey to the West does not present a particularly concrete archival trail of activities and movements, even the otherwise “planned” US part of it, in the first three months of 1952 (Karin Zitzewitz, personal communication).
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- 50 Hye, *Sultan*, 256.
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