



Ecological Collapse And Art As Archival Witness: Zainul Abedin's Pictorial Testimony To The Environmental And Historical Roots Of The 1943 Bengal Famine Disaster

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Abstract: This paper examines the 1943 Bengal famine through the lens of Zainul Abedin's work, Famine Sketches, explaining them as a vital archival document to the integrated ecological and literal forces that caused one of the twentieth century's most ruinous man-made disasters. Drawing on over three million deaths amid social Bengal's rice-dependent agricultural economy, Abedin's sketch definitions, executed in situ during the extremity, transcend bare attestation to embody a visceral notice of dictatorial neglect and environmental rupture. A 1942 cyclone destroyed paddy fields, aggravating fungal scars and yield failures, while World War II's extremities compounded the catastrophe. Japanese occupation disassociated Burmese rice significances, British 'Denial Programs' disassembled original aqueducts to baffle irruption, and wartime affectation fueled hoarding and annuity collapse, as theorized by Amartya Sen (Sen, Amartya, 1981).

Employing an interdisciplinary lens from environmental humanities and visual studies, this analysis positions Abedin's art as a counter-archive to harsh dominant historiographies that honor textual records and marginalize indigenous sensitive epistemologies. His compositions rendering deathly numbers clawing at cracked earth or huddled against cyclone-destroyed midair illuminate the famine of 'Slow Violence' (Nixon, 2011), where ecological impact points rained mortal catastrophe long before the severe starvation. The article illustrates how Abedin's testimonio anticipated current discussions about climate-induced famines, highlighting how art is able to capture the invisible cycles of ecological injustice.

This study contends that Abedin's work establishes an eco-artistic methodology in which visual witness challenges authoritative silences and predicts contemporary debates concerning the environmental humanities and postcolonial ecocriticism. By reclaiming these sketches as alternative narratives, the piece emphasizes art's ongoing role in recording socio-ecological memory, encouraging a rethinking of hunger as a predictor of global climate injustices.

Index Terms: Famine Sketches, Ecological Collapse, Environmental Humanities, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Slow Violence.

I. Introduction

The famous Bengal Famine in 1943 was one of the most devastating man-made disasters under British rule. This disaster was caused by British wartime economic policies and its administrative negligence. It focuses on the British government's involvement in this issue and their perception of Indian bodies. In view of the geopolitics of World War II, when British colonial officials were significantly more worried about a Japanese invasion of South Asia than they were about the lives of people dying of starvation, this paper aims to understand the local and global politics of the famine. Famine studies have been transformed in recent times, and the focus on the causes of famine has been relocated from crop failures

to the consequences of economic relations, social structures, and political actions¹. In essence, the understanding of famine shifted from Malthusian to a much more politically informed one. Concomitantly, as geographers' understanding of power and politics evolved, they delved into biopolitics² and subsequently colonial biopolitics³. This study looks at how the Bengal Famine is framed through a catastrophic crisis lens while also revealing the systemic injustices that caused the crisis. Zainul Abedin, a pioneering artist from Bengal, documented the human suffering of this era through a series of stark black-and-white sketches that not only depicted the famine as a disaster but also criticized the colonial government's inaction. The 1943 famine made a catastrophic crisis, especially in the area of West Bengal, India, and present-day Bangladesh. The Bengal site faces the most fatal crisis. Around three million people had died from starvation, malnutrition, and other water-related diseases. Zainul Abedin, as an artist, feels this incident very deeply. This fatal crisis touched his heart. He spoke up as an artist through his artistic works, the 'Famine Sketches.' Multiple works were done by him⁴. Where he tried to explain his feelings about this disaster. Like many other artists, Abedin was profoundly affected by the pervasive human misery he witnessed in his surroundings. When the famine broke out, he was in Kolkata, which was then Calcutta. He personally saw the terrible effects of hunger on the populace, especially on the weak and impoverished, who were already suffering as a result of the sociopolitical circumstances. He was deeply affected emotionally by the scenes of death, sorrow, and destitution. The famine was a direct result of British colonial exploitation in many respects. Under pressure from the war, the British administration has been accused of putting the interests of the empire ahead of the welfare of the people living on the Indian subcontinent. Abedin's writings exposed the human cost of imperial tactics and contained an underlying critique of colonial control.

II. Literature review

The 1943 Bengal Famine, which killed 2.1-3 million people, represents the relationship of ecological collapse and colonial exploitation, with Zainul Abedin's artworks serving as an important archive witness. Amartya Sen's 'Poverty and Famines' reframes the famine as a failure of entitlements, with inflation caused by war and interrupted transaction systems, rather than absolute food shortages, rendering rural laborers and farmers unable to survive.⁵ Madhusree Mukerjee's work 'Churchill's Secret War' describes how British 'denial policies' seized rice and boats to oppose Japanese invasion and exported grains despite poverty demonstrating colonial apathy.⁶ Paul R. Greenough's work 'Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal' emphasizes rural-urban relations, citing the devastation of Midnapore and Chittagong rice fields in 1942, compounded by Japan's conquest of Burma, which prevented imports.⁷ On the other hand, the ecological researchers argue about the environmental causes of the famine. Vimal Mishra et al. attribute it to soil moisture shortages, reflecting similar drought conditions.⁸ However, Mark Tauger's 'Colonial Biopolitics' contends that above-average 1943 rainfall changes the attention to policy failures rather than meteorological issues.⁹ These stories are consistent with Michel Foucault's biopolitical vision, in which colonial rulers valued the military sector above Indian lives, as seen by Churchill's contemptuous discourse that treated colonial bodies as worthless.

Subaltern voices are amplified through an eco-historical archive. According to James Lewis (2008), Abedin is an 'artist-witness,' whose works promote preventing famine by revealing ecological and colonial causes.¹⁰ Comparative examinations of Chittoprasad Bhattacharya's 'Hungry Bengal' reveal a common critical realism that indicts capitalism and colonialism.¹¹ So many other historians and researchers have expressed their thoughts on how the colonial aggression led to environmental

¹ Tauger MB. Entitlement, shortage, and the 1943 Bengal famine: Another look. *Journal of Peasant Studies*. 2003;31(1):45–72.

² Foucault M, Davidson AI, Burchell G. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*. Palgrave Macmillan; 2008.

³ Nally D. "That coming storm": The Irish poor law, colonial biopolitics, and the Great Famine. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 2008; 98(3): 714–741.

⁴ Richard Smith, "Zainul Abedin Famine Pictures," *Richard Smith's Blog*, June 7, 2017.

⁵ Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

⁶ Madhusree Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

⁷ Paul R. Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943–1944* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

⁸ Vimal Mishra, Rohini Kumar, Dev Niyogi, and Shilpi Srivastava, "Drought and Famine in India, 1870–2016," *Geophysical Research Letters* 46, no. 4 (2019): 2075–83.

⁹ Mark B. Tauger, "Colonial Biopolitics and the Bengal Famine of 1943," *Food and Foodways* 30, no. 1–2 (2022): 54–77.

¹⁰ James Lewis, "The Bengal Famine: Contrasting Views," *Journal of South Asian Studies* 31, no. 2 (2008): 273–94.

¹¹ Chittoprasad Bhattacharya, *Hungry Bengal: A Tour through Midnapur District in November 1943* (Calcutta: People's Publishing House, 1943).

devastation, which affected Bengal with a major outbreak of famine and drought and also starvation. The catastrophic incident highlighted by Zainul Abedin's stroke of sketches represents very significant evidence of humanitarian degradation.

III. Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative, multidisciplinary approach that combines postcolonial archive theory, visual art analysis, and environmental history. Examining how Zainul Abedin's 1943 famine sketches function as both artistic creations and historical records of ecological deterioration and the colonial circumstances that led to the Bengal famine is the main objective of this paper. The approach builds a multi-layered examination of the famine's portrayal in Abedin's art by referencing historical documents, critical theory, and pictorial analysis.

The primary sources include digital pictorial collections of Zainul Abedin's work on the famine of 1943. By analyzing the visual evidence of Abedin's work, formal features such as lines, composition, and shades were used to analyze the skeletal forms and humanitarian collapse as metaphors for the breakdown of nature. From that era, contemporary accounts like Ela Sen's work 'Darkening Days' explain a very intimate and emotional lens on the cultural and psychological effects of the Bengal famine that happened in 1943.¹² Her work highlights how rural loss is invisible in colonial discourse. It also points out the ecological and historical devastation through her literary counter-archive.

This study also uses the secondary sources to analyze the aspects. The result of ecological or environmental deterioration was made worse by colonial agrarian and economic practices, which pushed it through the ecological collapse of Bengal. In Mike Davis's 'Late Victorian Holocausts,' he explains how the British colonial policies and capitalist system were responsible for the horrific famine of the late 19th century. These natural calamities were not just brought by El Niño but were actually an aftermath of British policies.¹³ Also, Richard Grove, in his 'Green Imperialism,' explains that the early colonial researchers and bureaucrats first noticed the ecological harm brought by gradual imperial development in the colonial tropical regions. He shows how these colonial tropical sites were used as ecological testing sites.¹⁴ Finally, this study illustrates how artwork can serve as an archival historical narrative. It offers a critical framework for comprehending art as evidence for recreating the humanitarian and ecological disaster aspects.

IV. Historical Context: The Bengal Famine of 1943

One of the saddest catastrophes in South Asia during the 20th century was the 1943 Bengal famine. It took place during World War II, when India was ruled by the British Raj. The famine took the lives of 3 million people. Before the partition of the Indian colony in 1947, Bengal was included with the state of West Bengal in India and present-day Bangladesh. Its most important megacity was Calcutta, present-day Kolkata¹⁵. From 1772 to 1911, Calcutta was the capital of India. From 1912 to the present, Calcutta has been the capital of the state of West Bengal, India. The main causes of the Bengal famine of 1943 were an absolute shortage of rice due to the loss of imports from Burma and rice exports from Bengal to Sri Lanka. The regions of the British Empire that could not get rice from Southeast Asia after the fall of Burma. Calcutta witnessed the famine in the form of destitute millions from the pastoral areas who traveled there from the nearby pastoral districts. That time, poor people thought that if they could move to Calcutta, they had a better chance of survival than anywhere else in Bengal. Many organizations offered food for those needy people. Foods were distributed from more than one kitchen at an exact particular time of day. Poor people can get one meal for the day. For the meal, soup made from poor-quality millet and vegetables was supplied from the kitchens. But these low-quality foods created another famine as diarrhea caused more losses. At least 60% of Bengal's cultivable area was affected by the famine in 1943. Approximately 5 million pastoral families fell into a state of beggary. These worst phases lasted eight months, which created starvation, diseases, malnutrition, and human-made catastrophes.¹⁶

Referral map major famine areas in India during British rule [1765 to 1947] Source: (Purkait et al., 2020)

¹² Ela Sen, *Darkening Days: Being a Narrative of Famine-Stricken Bengal* (Calcutta: Orient Book Co., 1944).

¹³ Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2001).

¹⁴ Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁵ Senjuti Mallik, "Colonial Biopolitics and the Great Bengal Famine of 1943," *GeoJournal* 88, no. 3 (December 6, 2022): 3205–3221.

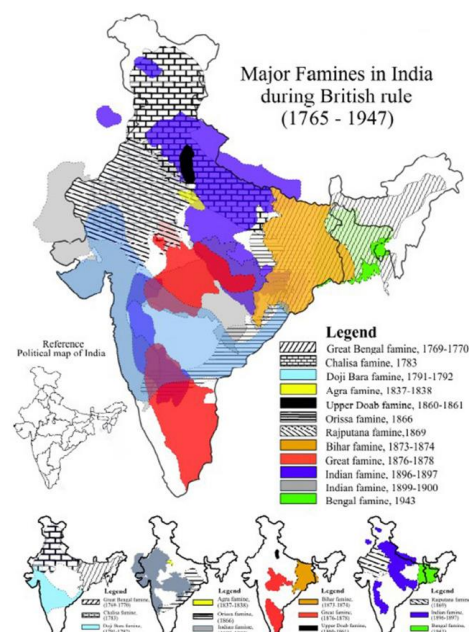
¹⁶ Purkait P, Kumar N, Sahani R, and Mukherjee S. Major Famines in India during British Rule: A Referral Map. *Anthropos India*. 2020;6:61–66

V. Causes of 1943 Bengal Famine

I hate Indians. They are a beastly people with a beastly religion. The famine was their own fault for breeding like rabbits. –Winston Churchill¹⁷

Basically, famine evolved from hunger, food shortages, and mass starvation to include war, poverty, and market failure. The 1943 Bengal famine also happened for many reasons. It did not happen for any other environmental factors. But for this famine, this devastating crisis happened for some humanitarian causes. The main role was played by the British colonial power. In the year 1941, Bengal witnessed a major food shortage due to poor harvesting, and a major district in Bengal faced hunger marches. January 19, 1942: Gandhi warned the Indians that statistics scarcity would worsen as the war continued. 'There are no imports from outside, either of foodstuff or cloth,' he observed. He advised peasants to grow banana, beetroot, yam, and pumpkin, which 'can take the place of bread in times of need'.¹⁸

Major causes of 1943 Bengal famine described by many researchers after innumerable debates are: (a) an absolute shortage of rice, due to the loss of imports from Burma, and rice exports from Bengal to Sri Lanka (since it was one of the strategic bases against Japan; the British called it Ceylon) and to those regions of the British empire that could not get rice from Southeast Asia after the fall of Burma; (b) the 'material and psychological' consequences of World War II, creating a drastic increase in the price of rice; (c) the incompetence of the government of Bengal to control the supply and distribution of food grains in the market, thus generating large scale hoarding; (d) delayed response after the onset of famine; and (e) the government of India's procrastination in putting into operation a nation-wide system of moving supplies from food surplus to deficit areas.¹⁹



VI. Oral Histories of the Bengal Famine

The 1943 Bengal famine left a permanent impression on individuals who experienced its horrors, although official documents frequently fail to reflect the survivors' personal suffering and resilience. Many people sold their boys and girls for a little rice. Many wives and young women ran off, hand-in-hand with men they knew or didn't know.

Bijoykrishna Tripathi described this 1943 famine from his faded memory. He said that at the time people got desperate to find food during the Bengal famine. He was not sure of his exact age, but his voter card says he is 112. Bijoykrishna was one of the last people to remember the disaster. He talked faintly and slowly about growing up in Midnapore, a district in Bengal. Rice was the staple food, and he remembers its price rising 'by leaps and bounds' in the summer of 1942. Rice soon became unaffordable for his family. 'Hunger stalked us. Hunger and epidemics. People of all ages began to die.' 'Everyone had to live with half-empty stomachs,' he says. 'Since there was nothing to eat, many people in the village died. People started looting, searching for food.'²⁰

Gupta, a housewife, faced such a terrifying reality in the period of the 1943 Bengal famine. She said, 'I saw a mother feed her baby with such infinite patience, drop by drop, a sugar and salt solution. She saved that child. Dehydration was a major problem at that time.'

One boy named Nitai from Dhaka, East Bengal (Bangladesh) 'My mother died perhaps two years before the famine, when I was two or so,' Sawrkar said in 2003. 'My father came to Bankura for work and brought me with him.' Unable to feed the boy during the famine, Nitai's father had left him at Gupta's orphanage. The home held only ten children then; by the end of the famine, it would have fifty.

One of Gita Mukhopadhyay's aunts started a relief kitchen, and Gita would help line up the destitute who gathered there. One woman with a baby kept saying, "Please give me milk now, right now,"

¹⁷ Choudhury, S. (2021). Bengal Famine of 1943: Misfortune or Imperial Schema. *Cognitive Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 1(5), 15-21.

¹⁸ Madhusree Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India During World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 48.

¹⁹ Senjuti Mallik, "Colonial Biopolitics and the Great Bengal Famine of 1943," *GeoJournal* 88, no. 3 (December 6, 2022): 3205–3221.

²⁰ Kavita Puri, "Bengal Famine: Tracking Down the Last Survivors of WW2's Forgotten Tragedy," *BBC News*, February 23, 2024

Mukhopadhyay recalled. 'But we couldn't put her ahead of the others, who were also desperate. When she finally reached the head of the line, she said, "I don't need milk anymore." Her baby had died.'²¹

VI. Zainul Abedin's Artistic Response

Zainul Abedin, born in 1914 in Mymensingh, Bangladesh, was a painter, cultural organizer, and pedagogue who is considered the founding figure of Bangladeshi modern art. He was a Muslim teacher at the Calcutta Art School.²² Abedin moved to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) after the partition of India. In the year of 1943, he focused on and documented the struggle and suffering through 'Famine Sketches.' He drew a series of sketches on the man-made famine that had spread throughout Bengal in 1943, killing hundreds of thousands of people. The drawings known as Famine Sketches are haunting images of the cruelty and depravity of the merchants of death and the utter helplessness of the victims.²³ The sketches helped him find his rhythm in a realistic mode that foregrounds human sufferings, struggle, and protest. Zainul Abedin unveils the horror in his famine sketches. Made with rapid brush strokes, the sketches are not only from a gripping account of the famine's vicious spread and expose the structural ties between hunger and imperial violence, but also, alongside the works of Chittraprasad, Sunil Janah, and others, they recount a common struggle of the avant-garde under colonial rule on the Indian Subcontinent.²⁴ Abedin's work includes different characteristics of art. A unique characteristic of his work added the dominating negative space. His figures are resonantly brought into focus on the flattening of background details. The abundance of empty white spaces looming around his human subjects further imposes an idea of loss into his art composition.²⁵

The painting depicts the human struggle for survival during the famine of 1943. Zainul Abedin here created a vivid scene of this struggle in which humans and crows are seen to be equally involved in the relentless effort to procure food from the dustbin.



In the second picture, we can see two children in a measurable skeletal figure where the boy's belly was puffed, which was a sign of an unhealthy diet and liver sickness. They both are sharing food from the same plate, and the crows serve as mute observers, practically waiting for death, representing how famine reduced human life to rotting flesh.



A skeletal, half-naked man trying to lick food from something to mitigate his hunger.





²¹ Madhusree Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India During World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 173-175.

²² "Zainul Abedin," *Bengal Foundation*. <https://bengalfoundation.org/featured-artist/zainul-abedin-2/>

²³ "Abedin, Zainul," *Banglapedia: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*, https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Abedin,_Zainul

²⁴ "Zainul Abedin," *documenta 14*, <https://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/21944/zainul-abedin>

²⁵ Adrija Dutta, *The Bengal Famine of 1943: A Watershed Moment in the Shifting Consciousness of the Bengal Artist* (Monograph, All Art is Propaganda, April 15, 2023).

<p>His body is reduced to skin and bones, with sunken eyes and a lifeless appearance. This artwork depicts the tiredness and hopelessness of famine victims. The man is too feeble to stand and too exhausted to plead, and his body language reflects resignation. It symbolizes the silent suffering of innumerable faceless lives lost without resistance.</p>	
<p>A mother holding one child on her core and also feeding this child breast milk and feeding her another toddler from a plate. Both the mother and the children are in miserable condition for long-term starvation, and as we see, both are in a measurable skeletal figure. The pot alongside them indicates an absence of food.</p>	
<p>Mother crying, one hand on her face, Her son died of starvation on her back, her daughter gripping her mother's hand. And the mother, who was unable to manage food for her children. In front of them there was an empty plate and small bowl. All of them are in a devastating situation, in a skeletal figure, due to food crisis and starvation.</p>	
<p>A mother with her two kids searching for food with a plate in her hand. All of them are in skeletal figures. The infant was looking sick and was on the lap of his sister. Seeing no future in front of them. The mother was seen in a disoriented state.</p>	

"Zainul Abedin," *Bengal Foundation*. (Pictures)

<https://bengalfoundation.org/featured-artist/zainul-abedin-2/>

The 'Famine Sketches' described the haunting reality of the 1943 Bengal great humanitarian crisis, a disastrous event that claimed millions of lives due to starvation and social mismanagement. Through the lens of Zainul Abedin's famine sketches, these scenes capture the maximum despair, helplessness, and dehumanization brought by hunger. Abedin's Famine sketches stark literalism, depicting skeletal figures of men, women, and children floundering to survive. The mother mourning over her dead child, the skeletal man desperately licking food, and the children suffering from malnutrition reflect not just physical suffering but also the emotional and cerebral torment of starvation. The presence of crows, frequently emblematic of death and decay, reinforces the grim atmosphere of ineluctable demise. These artworks serve as an important notice of systemic failures of social exploitation, profitable neglect, and food mismanagement, exposing the brutal consequences of shortage. They don't just document

suffering; they elicit empathy, wrathfulness, and reflection, making them a lasting testament to one of history's most ruinous philanthropic heads.

VIII. Discussion

The 1943 Bengal famine, which killed more than three million people, was not a natural disaster but rather a catastrophe caused by colonial oppression and policies that emphasized foreign interests over human survival. The British colonial aggressiveness expressed itself in exploitative land revenue schemes and forced agricultural shifts toward cash crops, undermining Bengal's food security well before the conflict. British officials preserved and exported food to support Allied forces, causing prices to skyrocket by up to 500% amid rumors and overstocking. Inflation, purposely created by 'profit inflation' measures to fund the war project, undermined entitlements, driving the rural poor to famine as rice prices skyrocketed beyond their reach.

These factors contributed equally to ecological degradation. Colonial practices neglected agriculture and flood management, exacerbating the 1942 cyclone's devastation, which lost 20-30% of crops. War purchases reduced farmlands' manpower and resources, encouraging overexploitation and soil erosion. So we can say that Zainul Abedin's famine sketches clearly depict this evidence. His artistic charcoal drawings represent ghostly humans foraging in areas devastated by cyclones, representing ecological collapse caused by policy-exacerbated disasters. Folk motifs and subaltern bodies emphasize vulnerability, acting as decolonial archives that question official narratives and connect human misery with natural and governmental failures. Abedin uses these works to make immortal the famine's roots in colonial injustice.

IX. Conclusion

The 1943 Bengal famine remains one of the most ruinous examples of social negligence and exploitation, aggravated by British wartime programs. This catastrophe wasn't simply a natural disaster but a man-made disaster. Which is extremely fueled by profitable mismanagement and political colonial apathy. The famine impact, particularly in Bengal, resulted in the deaths of nearly three million people, exposing the harsh realities of Homeric rule. Zainul Abedin's 'Famine Sketches' serve as important cultural evidence of the mortal suffering of this period. His stark, hanging delineations not only proved the famine's brutality but also critiqued the social government's failure to address the extremity. By framing the famine as both a philanthropic and political disaster, Abedin's work reinforces the shift in famine studies from a Malthusian perspective to one that acknowledges the part of political and social structures. His art remains a pivotal literal record, ensuring that the memory of this woeful event endures as an assignment against systemic injustice.

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