

# **Decolonizing in the Age of Globalization: The Experience of a Bangladeshi Art Historian**

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Rabindranath Tagore, the great poet-philosopher of Bengal once said, “To taste the beauty of a Greek sculpture or an Italian Renaissance painting, one needs not to be a Greek or an Italian. A painting is actually a painting, not Indian, Ajantan, nothing.”<sup>1</sup> He wrote this back in 1932. The world has moved on from that point, especially from a political point of view. Bangladesh has had the experience of being “independent” twice—but the notion Tagore shared in an interview with Buddhadev Basu, a fellow poet, is still relevant. Discourses are going on; thinkers are still looking for ways to become “independent” in many spheres, including artistic vision. Decolonization, as we call it, is rather a modern phenomenon that has been bubbling up since the late twentieth century. There are calls for decolonizing everything, art history included.

The concept of decolonization is twofold. First, it means the end of colonization—being independent politically and administratively. Like most of the countries that had been colonized by the European powerhouses such as the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Netherlands, and Portugal, Bangladesh also had the experience of becoming politically independent from British rule in 1947. But because the new state of Pakistan still harbored colonial characteristics, the country had to fight again for independence in 1971. The more important aspect began after that point, that of countering the influences of colonization that remained in the society and culture.

The question is, how is this accomplished? In the experience of Bangladesh during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, approaches to teaching about art, like much else, had been formulated to comply with the needs of the colonial ruling class. During the nineteenth century, the British government had established many schools of industrial art.<sup>2</sup> The policy behind the establishment of these schools clearly indicates the imperialist ideology of the British Raj. Even though Bengal (as part of greater India) had a rich

heritage of art, there was a notion of denial of anything that could be called Indian art in the mindset of the ruling class. Ratnabali Chatterjee cited some correspondence between Alexander Hunter, Superintendent of the Madras School of Industrial Art and E.B. Powell, Director of Public Instructions, Madras, in April 1867 on the extension of art education, in which Hunter displays this attitude.<sup>3</sup> James Mill, in his famous *History of British India* reflects the same, as he feels that Indian art was in a primitive stage, especially in painting: “They are entirely without knowledge of perspective and by consequence all finer and nobler parts of the art of painting which have perspective for their respective basis.”<sup>4</sup> The British curriculum of art education developed in the next 150 years around this apprehension, with an eye on creating a cadre of trained craftsmen who would serve the government. This is what Edward Said called the colonial mindset, marking the “otherness” of the colonized society, and, by terming them “inferior,” affirming the superiority of the colonists.<sup>5</sup> For more than a century this colonial mindset shaped the psychological pattern of the artists and art historian/critics of Bengal. In the postcolonial condition, the main challenge was to break this cycle or to create a process to rectify these influences. Indeed, such influences either denounced or distorted the precolonial ideas and elements of the society and culture. To many, this is what decolonization is, looking back to precolonial ideas.

But, where to start? To reshape the curriculum of art education, the first thing needed is literature for the students. The problem is that formal art education was institutionalized here during the British period. Yes, there is a glorious heritage of art practice that can be traced back at least to the third century BC, but little is known about the art education process before the nineteenth century. At best, it can be said that it was a process of learning between the *guru* (trainer) and *shisya* (trainee) in all practicality. There are ancient Sanskrit texts and treatises on art and aesthetics—most of them were even translated during the colonial period—but an approach independent of the colonial mindset is lacking. Also lacking are texts and critiques written by indigenous writers. This was the biggest challenge for Zainul Abedin and his contemporaries while establishing the Art College in Dhaka in 1948.

The urge for an indigenous art history was felt during the nineteenth century, beginning with the pioneering work of Shyamacharan Srimani, *Suksha Shilper Utpatti O Arya Jatir Shilpa Chaturi* (Fine Arts of Ancient India, with a Short Sketch of the Origin of Art), published in Kolkata in 1874. It was the first book on art written in Bangla, a cheap and slim publication with the intent to reach a wide range of readers. It was indeed an example of an extreme nationalistic response to the imperialistic ways of treating indigenous art in Bengal and India. Srimani concluded his book with an appeal to “come to the service of the motherland, by recovering her past traditions of art.”<sup>6</sup> As part of his effort, he did try to create a new vocabulary, translating the English terminology into Sanskrit-based Bangla such as *stamva* (column), *upapitha* (pedestal), and *upan* (plinth). But at the same time he used other terms such as cymatium, corona, and echinus in Bangla transliteration with the original Latin word in brackets. This shows that even with his nationalistic zeal, Srimani had eventually succumbed to the trap of hybrid identity that is a common feature of colonized society.<sup>7</sup>

Srimani was enthusiastic about the fine art (*Suksha Silpa*, according to his new terminology) quality of the country's glorious past, for which he and his contemporaries sought an Aryan root. But a few of his contemporaries were more concerned with the “present.” A different type of book, *Chitravidya* (Lessons on Painting) was published in the same year, 1874. Its writer, Charuchandra Nag, actually tried to create a back-up for the art-school curriculum in Bangla. He provided instructions for outline drawing, toning, and shading of human anatomy, flora and fauna, and still-life forms. However, he was obsessed with the imperialistic ideology of the British Raj, professed by people like Hunter, stating that the finest form of human face and figure could be seen in the Greek race.<sup>8</sup> Just as Srimani and Nag's thoughts differed, an even greater contrast was evident in the famous Burns-Havell debate on the formulation of art education policies.<sup>9</sup> E. B. Havell, the British orientalist, was sympathetic to the indigenous art heritage of India, as was the pioneer artist Abanindranath Tagore and his followers in the famous Bengal School. They were not alien to the academic realism of the art-school curriculum; rather they used it to recreate the nationalistic art.

In recent times, when the debate on decolonization is stemming up as an academic discourse, the general concept is that decolonization actually means to rectify the process that either denounced or distorted the precolonial ideas and elements of society and culture. In that context, even the art of Abanindranath and contemporary nationalists may also be considered colonized, or more precisely as examples of the “hybrid culture.” They were not alien to the academic realism of the art-school curriculum; rather they used it to recreate the nationalistic art, which was so popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

While establishing the first art institute in Bangladesh, Zainul followed the same path. He was taught and trained in the Calcutta Art School; he imitated those in his academy curriculum in Dhaka. However, as the Dhaka Art College was established in the postcolonial period in 1948, the curriculum needed to be modified to some extent. Zainul's earlier and celebrated works on the great famine of 1943 demonstrate his commitment to postcolonial society; the establishment of the college itself was a continuation of this commitment. It was also reflected in his treatment of the institute, where he introduced a separate department called Oriental Art, taking Abanindranath and his fellow nationalists of the early twentieth century as pioneers. At the same time, he tried to create his own brand of indigenous modernism, mixing up the academic treatment of techniques and equipment with subject matter from the cultural heritage. Thus he was able to create paintings like *The Struggle* (Fig. 1) or the *Toeing Boat* (Fig. 2). However, the ideology of the new statecraft of Pakistan had different views, especially on looking back to the Aryan root of heritage. Many of his contemporaries tried to counter it with even more Eurocentrism, reverting to absolute abstraction as an armament to fight the conservative approaches toward figurative art (Fig. 3), but Zainul did not.



1 Zainul Abedin, *Struggle*, 1976, oil on canvas, 23 9/16 x 95 5/8 in. (60 x 243cm). Jahanara Abedin collection, Bangladesh



2 Zainul Abedin, *Towing Boat*, 1955, gouache on paper, 9.8 x 13.8 in. (25 x 35 cm). Bangladesh National Museum



3 Safiuddin, *Angry Fish*, 1964, etching and aquatint, 18.1 x 10.2 in. (46 x 26 cm). Ahmed Nazir collection, Bangladesh

As time flies on, and the world order turns to the age of globalization, with shrinking geographic boundaries in the wake of an information technology boom, Tagore's understanding becomes even more relevant—art has no boundaries! If that is so, looking for answers in past glory, or only rectifying the purity that was denounced or distorted by the imperialistic process, is not sustainable. We need to create new vocabularies and new understandings, but not running in only one direction, rejecting everything that is Eurocentric. In fact the notion of Eurocentrism itself conflicts with postcolonial understanding. Taking for granted that Europe is the “center” and that one is in the

“periphery” may create a psychological disadvantage. Decolonization should start from dismantling this very concept of center and periphery. When you are able to take the whole world as your working place, synthesize ideas and thoughts, and recreate them in your own cultural settings, only then can you break the shackles on your mind. That is a long-term process though.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Rabindra Rachanavali*, Vol. 29 (Dhaka: Oitijya Prokashon, 2016), p. 145.

<sup>2</sup> Starting from 1864 with the establishment of the Government Art School in Calcutta, twenty-two industrial art schools had been established in different parts of India, including three major art schools in Calcutta (Kolkata), Bombay (Mumbai), and Madras (Chennai) by the year 1867. The Lahore art school joined in 1878. For details, see J. C. Bagal, “History of the Government College of Arts and Craft,” in *Government College of Art Centenary Volume, 1864–1964* (Calcutta: Government College of Art & Craft, 1966), 1–2.

<sup>3</sup> Ratnabali Chatterjee, *From the Karkhana to the Studio: A Study in the Changing Social Roles of Patron and Artist in Bengal* (New Delhi: Books & Books, 1990), 75.

<sup>4</sup> Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 176–77.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conception of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 54, 332.

<sup>6</sup> Shyamacharan Srimani, *Suksha Shilper Utpatti O Arya Jatir Shilpa Chaturi* (Calcutta: Roy Press, 1874), 76.

<sup>7</sup> Homi K. Bhaba, “Sign Taken for Wonders: Question of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817,” *Critical Enquiry* 12:1 (1985).

<sup>8</sup> Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New Indian Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c.1850–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 125.

<sup>9</sup> E.B. Havell, *The Basis for Artistic and Industrial Revival in India* (Madras: Theosophist Office, 1912), chap. 7. An analysis of this debate can be found in Chatterjee, *Karkhana to the Studio*, 74–112.