

States of Legibility:
Mohammad Kibria's Calligraphic Modernism, 1950-1970

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Abstract

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This paper focuses on the works of Bangladeshi artist Mohammad Kibria, particularly those created between the 1950s and 1970s, the decades around the time in which the artist studied in Japan at the Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music. In doing so, this paper examines how the network of artistic exchange between Bengal and Japan has persisted and transformed through periods of decolonization and independence. The paper situates Kibria's practice within the historical context of Pan-Asianism and engages more recent scholarship on calligraphic and global modernism. The paper proposes a reading of the artist's work that considers the shifting relationship between the artist and the nation-state in postcolonial Bengal, as well as the hazy distinction between word and image in calligraphic modernism.

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Introduction

At first glance, Mohammad Kibria’s 1965 lithograph *Alphabets* does not appear to be legible in Bengali or English (Figure 1). A bright orange center bleeds into a teal exterior and streaks of black curve and curl around one another, moving towards the shape of letters but never fully forming. These black strokes mingle on the surface of the lithograph as if to invite deciphering, and yet they provide no clear guide to do so. They remain suspended in a state of illegibility and actively defy a fixed definition. The strokes, much like the artist who created them, exist within and across time and space.

Biographies of Mohammad Kibria (1929-2011) often point to the period between 1959 and 1962 when the artist lived in Japan and studied at the Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music as a formative experience.¹ While in many ways the artist’s travel to Japan contributed to his unique practice, Kibria’s career can be seen in the context of a broader network of regional artistic exchange between Bengal and Japan that developed and persisted throughout the twentieth century. This paper considers the legacy of that network through an examination of Kibria’s practice in the decades following the division of the Indian subcontinent, a time in which the area called “Bengal” shifted in geographic, political, and cultural terms. In British India, Calcutta (present-day Kolkata in the state of West Bengal, India) was the capital, and the Government School of Art (established 1854) in the city was the center of Bengali art education. In the century following the establishment of the art school, the capital of British India moved to New Delhi (1911), Bengal was divided as a result of partition between India and East Pakistan (1947), and then transformed from East Pakistan into the independent nation of Bangladesh

¹ Javed Jalil, Meredith Farruk, and Tania Zaman, *Kibria* (Dhaka: Society for the Promotion of Bangladesh Art, 2008), 15. Kibria was funded at least in part by the Japanese Ministry of Education to study painting and printmaking.

(1971). Calcutta, in India, maintained the Government School of Art which continues operation today. The geopolitical situation impacted artists and artistic institutions during the mid-twentieth century, and Kibria's practice during this period provides a useful entry point to consider the role of the postcolonial nation-state within a regional Asian network.

Focusing on Kibria's work from the 1950s to 1970s, this paper suggests a way of thinking about artistic exchange within Asia during the twentieth century that goes beyond existing theories of Pan-Asianism. Although Kibria's practice can be contextualized within a long trajectory of twentieth-century exchange between East and South Asia, one that led to the emergence of Pan-Asian ideology, this paper challenges the idea that exchange within the region continues to be based on a romantic notion of "Asianness" alone. Rather, by considering a period of the artist's career that coincides with the formation and eventual independence of the nation-state of Bangladesh, this paper highlights the ways in which visual-cultural exchange is dynamic and actively changing.

The project of examining Kibria's career in the context of regional exchange between Bengal and Japan suggests a framework that considers the development of modernism as a map of complex routes—routes that merge, overlap, move in opposite directions, and run parallel to one another.² This is a thoroughly transnational approach that does not look from only West to East, or even from only East to East. Although this project focuses on a particular segment of such a map, between Bengal and Japan, it does not imply that this exchange has only one route,

² Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 20. See especially discussion about the idea of cosmopolitanism. Ming Tiampo, *Gutai: Decentering Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 4. Tiampo states that her project is not just about filling in a map of modernism; rather it "must be rethought to cope with a multidimensional narrative and its theoretical consequences." Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000), xiii.

or even a final destination. Rather, as Kibria's work from the 1950s to the 1970s highlights, in his engagement with Japan, Kibria simultaneously participated in a historical network of exchange at the same time as he was developing an artistic practice that drew on various styles and influences and was not limited to an appropriation of essentialized Japanese styles. The location of Japan remains an important consideration in this study, however, it does not imply that Kibria's work was only influenced by Japanese art. Rather, we might consider the compilation of sources he drew on, including calligraphy, cubism, and abstraction, which he developed over his career in Calcutta, Tokyo, and Dhaka.

Building on scholarship theorizing calligraphic modernism in the mid-twentieth century, this paper situates Kibria's practice in a framework that considers the shifting relationship between the artist and the nation-state as well as the complex relationship of image and word. This paper proposes looking at Kibria as an exemplary case in the history of artists who moved between Bengal and Japan, and the artist's work, such as *Alphabets*, as a dynamic archive of such an exchange.

Pan-Asianism and Early Twentieth Century Exchange Between Bengal and Japan

In the early twentieth century, Pan-Asianism was an anti-Western political ideology that can be related to political movements outside of East and South Asia.³ Pan-Asianism emerged as a challenge to a Eurocentric world order, yet there were various perspectives on what the best alternative order should look like. This means that Pan-Asianism—and even Asia—had many

³ Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 3. From a political standpoint, Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese war in 1905 sent reverberations of Asian solidarity around the continent, and a parallel movement of Pan-Islamism emerged around the same time.

aligned with and welcomed the ideas expressed in Okakura's book.¹¹ Yet a shared sense of regional identity did not necessarily mean that visions of nationalism were identical in both places. As India sought to gain independence from the British, Japan became increasingly militarized, a development that Rabindranath Tagore would criticize in the years following Okakura's death.¹²

While Pan-Asianism had distinct political and artistic trajectories, their aims intermingled in twentieth century Bengal. Although *Ideals of the East* is often cited for its introductory line "Asia is one"—and the political implications thereof—the book's focus is Japanese art.¹³ Further, Okakura's writings suggest that although he sees a connected Asian culture, Japan is ultimately the steward of that culture.¹⁴ This highlights not only the hierarchical dimensions of this regional solidarity, but also shows the limitations of a Pan-Asianist framework to account for the various interests within Asia, particularly in the context of nationalism and new nations. Significantly, written in English, Okakura's book was geared towards a Western audience, and even in Japan, Okakura's works were not widely read until the 1930s, several years after his death.¹⁵

¹¹ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Dialogues in Artistic Nationalism," *Art India* 14, no. 3 (2009): 24-26. See also Shigemi Inaga, "The Interaction of Bengali and Japanese Artistic Milieus in the First Half of the Twentieth Century (1901-1945): Rabindranath Tagore, Arai Kanpo, and Nandalal Bose," *Japan Review* no. 21 (2009): 154.

¹² Guha-Thakurta, "Dialogues on Artistic Nationalism," 37.

¹³ Rustom Bharucha, *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 18.

¹⁴ Okakura, *The Ideals of the East*, 11. Okakura describes Japan's "unique blessing of unbroken sovereignty, the proud self-reliance of an unconquered race, and the insular isolation which protected ancestral ideas and instincts at the cost of expansion."

¹⁵ Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia*: 113.

Bharucha, *Another Asia*, 21, 53. See also Bharucha, *Another Asia*, 6. Okakura occupied a position at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston from 1904 until his death in 1913.

At the same time, Okakura and Rabindranath played significant roles in propagating Pan-Asian ideas in the early twentieth century, and they were particularly influential to a specific group of artists during this period. Several of Okakura's students traveled from Japan to India, including Arai Kampo, Hishida Shunso, and Yokoyama Taikan. These artists, like Okakura, were associated with the *Nihonga* school of painting, which, in the early twentieth century, fashioned itself as an essentially Japanese school of painting.¹⁶ Indian artists also traveled to Japan during this period, including Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, and Mukul Dey. This period of the regional exchange can be characterized by the artists' interest in adopting particular styles or methods that could be characterized as fundamentally "Japanese" or "Indian."¹⁷

Shigemi Inaga's scholarship on the Japanese and Indian artists who worked together in this early period focuses on the ways in which their art came to resemble one another technically, particularly through the Indian artists' adoption of the water-drip technique.¹⁸ In doing so, Inaga draws stylistic connections between Abanindranath Tagore's famous *Bharat Mata* (1906-1906) and Arai Kampo's *Konohana Sakuya-hime* (1938).¹⁹ Kampo worked closely with Nandalal Bose during his stay in India in the 1910s, and Bose himself traveled to Japan in the 1920s.²⁰ In a piece by Bose, *Monsoon Clouds over Rice Field* (1960), the artist stamped a red seal near the painting's date in the lower right corner of the painting (see Figure 5). Seals such as this were a

¹⁶ Guha-Thakurta, "Dialogues in Artistic Nationalism," 24.

¹⁷ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, aesthetics and nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 249.

See also Guha-Thakurta, "Dialogues on Artistic Nationalism," 25.

¹⁸ Inaga, "The Interaction of Bengali and Japanese Artistic Milieus," 151-153.

Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art*, 249. Guha-Thakurta has also written about Abanindranath Tagore's use of the wash technique.

¹⁹ Inaga, "The Interaction of Bengali and Japanese Artistic Milieus," 165-166.

²⁰ Inaga, "The Interaction of Bengali and Japanese Artistic Milieus," 159-160. See also Sonya Rhie Quintanilla, *Rhythms of India: The Art of Nandalal Bose* (San Diego: San Diego Museum of Art, 2008), 78.

common way of signing one's name in the art of Japan and China, and one that was adopted by other Bengali artists at the time. Further, while Inaga also traces the wash style in Bose's work, he argues that it is more closely connected to the "broken brush stroke" technique that was used by the Chinese artist Zhang Daqian in the mid-twentieth century.²¹ Inaga argues that artists from India, Japan, and China utilized a Pan-Asian visuality that challenged Western modernism.²² In other words, these artists created a distinctly "Asian" style of art making, one that was likely inspired by travel within Asia, working with new artists and techniques, and significantly, by exposure to particular sites that symbolized a type of unified Asian history.²³

Pan-Asianism was not simply a byproduct of Okakura's writings, nor was it a single, coherent political or art historical theory. Rather, it was taken up at different times and in different ways throughout the twentieth century. This paper references the history of Pan-Asianism as a point of entry for further discussion on transnational artistic exchange rather than accepting it as the sole factor in perpetuating contact between Bengal and Japan. Networks of exchange within Asia remain an important consideration when looking at how art moves around the globe in the modern and contemporary periods, but they require a new framework of analysis that can account for the changing geopolitics of the region. This paper suggests that a framework of transnational modernism is more illuminating in its ability to meaningfully consider the nation-state and postcolonial contexts.

Theories of Transnational Modernism

²¹ Inaga, "The Interaction of Bengali and Japanese Artistic Milieus," 169.

²² Inaga, "The Interaction of Bengali and Japanese Artistic Milieus," 171.

²³ Inaga, "The Interaction of Bengali and Japanese Artistic Milieus," 161-164. Specifically, these sites included the Ajanta caves in India and Horyuji temple in Japan, Buddhist sites with significant mural programs.

In aiming to build a regional network across nations, Pan-Asianism is transnational. However, in the decades since *Ideals of the East* was published, scholars have argued that one effect of Okakura's framework is that it reinforces a binary between East and West, or more specifically between "Western materialism" and "Eastern spirituality."²⁴ By envisioning Asia and the West as discrete spheres, this implies that each has its own set of distinct, innate attributes that is absent in the other. This resonates with critiques of the center-periphery model, a model that places "developed" nations at the center and "underdeveloped" nations at the periphery.²⁵ The problem with this model, as Partha Mitter argues, is that it insists on a universal concept of what constitutes the "modern" that is defined by the Western/European center and then blindly copied by the non-Western periphery.²⁶ Scholarship on modernism in South Asia challenges the notion that modernism developed evenly or identically across the globe,²⁷ and posits that an important first step in an examination of modern art practice is recognizing the specific historical context of various modernisms. At the same time, a rejection of the center-periphery as a model for art history does not require ignoring interactions between center and periphery. Geeta Kapur explains: "We should see our trajectories crisscrossing the western mainstream and, in their very disalignment from it, making up the ground that restructures the international."²⁸ This presents a clear challenge to the distinct spheres carved by Okakura's Pan-

²⁴ Guha-Thakurta, "Dialogues on Artistic Nationalism," 22, 30.

²⁵ Kapur, *When Was Modernism*, 284, see also 276-77.

See also Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *The Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (December 2008): 540. Mitter clarifies that the concept of the center-periphery is not only a reference to geographic configurations but also implies imbalanced power relations.

²⁶ Mitter, "Decentering Modernism," 531-534.

²⁷ Kapur, *When Was Modernism*, xiii.

²⁸ Kapur, *When Was Modernism*, 297.

Asianism, and suggests the importance of seeing international, regional, and transcultural exchanges not in isolation but as a part of modernism's broader contexts.

Recent scholarship builds on these critiques and theorizes a framework of transnational modernism that examines alternative ways of thinking about cultural flows and artistic exchange. This includes Sonal Khullar's analysis of affiliative networks, which considers the ways in which "artists and intellectuals in India sought a national identity that was also international—often critical of, yet constantly engaged with, ideas in the West and elsewhere."²⁹ Ming Tiampo's study of the Gutai group has similar goals, and proposes cultural mercantilism as a mode of analysis, explaining that "Modernism must be reevaluated as a transnational event that is necessarily tied to its history of colonialism, imperialism, war, and the concomitant outcomes of travel, commerce, media, immigration, and imagination."³⁰ These theories do not dismiss interactions that happened between "East" and "West" but instead propose a way of visualizing the complexities of these relationships and exchanges in the development of modernism. Rather, these theories help to envision the simultaneous existence of multiple exchanges and multiple agents of influence that are themselves interconnected in contingent, non-linear ways.³¹

A painting completed during Kibria's first year in Japan illustrates the artist's engagement with transnational modern practices that were not limited to Japan. *Swimming* (1959) is reminiscent of Japanese calligraphy in its use of monochromatic ink on rice paper

²⁹ Sonal Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930-1990* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 24.

³⁰ Tiampo, *Gutai: Decentering Modernism*, 43.

³¹ Brian Larkin, "Indian Films and Nigerian Lovers: Media and the Creation of Parallel Modernities," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 67, no. 3 (1997): 407. Scholarship from film studies engages with transnational modernism in unique ways as well. Brian Larkin's idea of "parallel modernities," for example, describes "the coexistence in space and time of multiple economic, religious and cultural flows that are often subsumed within the term 'modernity.'"

(Figure 2). However, as opposed to an illustration of text, Kibria's composition is figural. Two bodies stretch across the horizontal surface of the paper, made up of thin lines that appear quickly rendered, as if sketched by pen rather than brush. The bodies are legible, but their outlines disrupt a smooth rendering of their contours. Instead, these thin lines seem to move like a written, cursive script that ascends and descends rhythmically across the paper. In the swimmers' feet, the form is broken down into flattened shapes made up of sketched lines that are perhaps a reference to the artist's interest in Paul Klee.³² The horizontal movement of the swimmers is reinforced by thicker, inky brushwork that creates pulsing bands of black across the image, suggesting a body of water in which they swim. This brushwork also forms a path for the viewer's eye to follow across the paper, as if to read the figures' movements as a text. These blotchier sections of black also draw attention to the piece's medium, as the ink bleeds into the rice paper, emphasizing its thinness. *Swimming* exhibits Kibria's experimentation with various styles, namely abstraction, cubism, and calligraphy.

Because of the date Kibria created *Swimming*, it is perhaps tempting to suggest that the piece's visual qualities are a result of the artist's travel to Japan. However, analysis of *Swimming* is complicated when it is compared to an oil painting by Kibria from before he travelled to Japan titled *Water sport* (1953) (Figure 3). Although the earlier painting is approximately three times larger than the later one, there is a clear connection between the two works. *Water sport* also shows two human figures moving horizontally across the surface of the image. The painted figures are not as loosely constructed as those in *Swimming*, yet the artist's interest in playing with abstract forms is evidenced by the deconstruction of the bodies into overlapping, flattened

³² Jalil, Farruk and Zaman, *Kibria*, 15. Another noted stylistic comparison is Giacometti's elongated bodies.

shapes. This is particularly noticeable in the lower figure's face, which appears to be made up of two distinct halves of a not perfectly symmetrical circle. In contrast to *Swimming*, *Water sport* is a composition of color, made up of blues, purples, and browns. This draws attention to *Water sport*'s medium as an oil painting, which is fleshed out by patterns of color. Although the figures in *Water sport* are abstracted, they illustrate Kibria's painterly, rather than linear style (the latter being more evident in *Swimming*).

Looking at *Water sport* and *Swimming*, painted only six years apart, a convenient rationale for the latter piece would be that travel and study in Japan encouraged Kibria to utilize a calligraphic or Japanese style to render a subject that he had painted before. *Swimming* certainly highlights a relationship with Japanese calligraphy, particularly in its medium and its use of line. However, this affiliation is multilayered and should not be dismissed as a blind adoption of what can broadly be classified as "Japanese" styles, which would reinforce the idea of a Pan-Asian visuality in his work. To do so would be to disregard the other components in Kibria's work, as well as the unique trajectory of calligraphy in Bengal, both of which provide a foundation for considering Kibria's transnational modernism.

Experimentations with Calligraphy in Bengal

Although Bengali letters do not have the same pictographic qualities as Japanese characters, several Bengali artists in the early twentieth century engaged with calligraphy. While calligraphy as an illustration of text was less common in this context, a collection of Abanindranath Tagore's drawings at the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta exemplifies such a usage. In these drawings, Tagore renders characters from the Bengali alphabet in black ink and embeds them within images that are made up of repeated forms of the same letter, usually painted in red and positioned at different angles or in different sizes. For example, in *First Bengali Alphabet*,

the Bangla character “ঐ” is decipherable as the form of a bird’s head (Figure 4). The letter is repeated in a mirrored and downward slanting angle to make up the bird’s body and wings, and in two elongated versions to form the bird’s legs. Tagore’s drawings demonstrate an interest in the illustrative capabilities of textual forms. In doing so, the artist’s work highlights an affiliation with calligraphy’s ability to bring forth the visual qualities of text, even though the text itself in Tagore’s drawing does not appear to imply any meaning beyond the letter that it represents.³³

Bengali artistic engagement with calligraphy did not have a single method, approach, or application, however. Benodebehari Mukherjee was also active in the first decades of the twentieth century, and much like other Bengali artists of his time, was interested in Japan and Japanese art. Mukherjee was a student at Santiniketan in the late 1910s, became a teacher there in the 1920s, and traveled to Japan in the 1930s. In many ways, Santiniketan was like an incubator for Pan-Asianism in the visual arts. Visva-Bharati University, the school founded by Rabindranath at Santiniketan, has an art school, as well as separate schools dedicated to the study of China and Japan. In addition, several Japanese artists visited Santiniketan throughout the twentieth century, and the institution subscribed to *Kokka*, the art journal founded by Okakura. The artist K.G. Subramanyan refers to Mukherjee’s “calligraphic painting,” while the scholar R. Siva Kumar suggests that it operates on a “calligraphic rationale,” which can be both abstract and representational as it is “based on breaking up visual facts into component units and relating them to different graphic notations or autonomous strokes which function as the modules of a visual language.”³⁴ Both of these interpretations express how Mukherjee blurred the distinction

³³ Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art*, 236. Guha-Thakurta notes Tagore’s interest in “ornamental calligraphy.”

³⁴ Gulammohammed Sheikh and R Siva Kumar, *Benodebehari Mukherjee (1904-1980): Centenary Retrospective* (New Delhi: Vadehra Art Gallery in collaboration with the National

between painting and calligraphy, practices that were not always seen as closely related.³⁵ At the same time, these comments also suggest that in doing so, the artist's manipulation of calligraphy was unique. In Bengal, although the concept of calligraphy was still closely associated with Japan and illustrations of texts, it had become so thoroughly enmeshed in Bengali artistic practice that it had taken on a new character in that context. Japanese calligraphy had transformed into a different style, or more specifically, into an artistic approach.

This approach manifested itself in different ways. Later in his career, around the same time that Kibria first traveled to Japan, Bose—a contemporary of the Tagores and Okakura—painted *Monsoon Clouds over Rice Field* (1960) (Figure 5). In this painting, a monochromatic scene of a rural landscape spreads out across the paper. The composition recalls Japanese calligraphy in its use of thick black ink, its smooth brushstrokes, as well as the white compositional space upon which the field is painted. Bose's painting also illustrates an engagement with abstraction, particularly in the way that the field appears to float in space and does not rely on outlines of shapes but rather on the strokes of the brush to produce its form.³⁶ This work exemplifies how the calligraphic style was not limited to illustrations of words or phrases, and highlights its compatibility with other stylistic approaches, such as abstraction. Tagore, Mukherjee, and Bose's works illustrate the malleability of calligraphic practice. By using calligraphic methods and styles in different ways, these artists highlighted how calligraphic

Gallery of Modern Art, 2007), 5-6 and 75-77. Significantly, both Subramanyan and Siva Kumar attended Visva-Bharati University (the latter is currently the principal of the art school).

³⁵ Craig Clunas, *Art in China* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 137-143. In ancient China, for example, calligraphy was regarded more highly than painting and it was only in the eleventh and twelfth centuries that the relationship between these two practices was acknowledged.

³⁶ Quintanilla, *Rhythms of India*, 79.

images are not always decipherable, legible, or translatable. Rather, as their work shows, calligraphy could also be visual, expressive, and abstract.

Experimentations with calligraphy were not limited to the artists at Santiniketan, however. Prior to his travel to Japan, Kibria studied at the Calcutta Government School of Art (now the Government College of Art and Craft, Kolkata) and taught at the Dhaka Art School (formerly the Government College of Arts and Crafts, and now the Institute of Fine Arts, Dhaka University). As a student in the early decades of the twentieth century in Calcutta, Kibria would have worked and studied alongside artists who were incorporating calligraphic styles in different ways into their work. This includes Kibria's teacher, Zainul Abedin, who was himself a student at the Calcutta Government School of Art in the 1930s and who would become an important figure in the preservation, research, and display of Bengali arts in East Pakistan (and ultimately Bangladesh).³⁷ The older artist is well-known for his *Famine* series from 1943, which responded to the horrific food shortage in Bengal that year and that led to a staggering number of deaths. In these paintings, Abedin depicts hunger-ravaged bodies withered down to flesh and bones (Figure 6). Occasionally there are minor details of a background like a tree trunk or an abstract architectural feature. The paintings from this series have been compared to Japanese calligraphy, as their figures are rendered in thick, black strokes that stand against minimalist backgrounds, illustrating visual similarities to monochromatic characters rendered on a blank white background.³⁸ As opposed to Kibria's use of thin lines and blotchy ink in *Swimming*, Abedin's

³⁷ Katherine Hacker, "In Search of Living Traditions: Gurusaday Dutt, Zainul Abedin, and the Institutional Life of Kanthas," in *Kantha: The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection and the Stella Kramrisch Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art*, ed. Darielle Mason and Pika Ghosh (Philadelphia and New Haven: Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press, 2009), 67-70.

³⁸ Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 102.

figures are composed of solid lines, appearing to be painted using the side rather than the tip of the brush. This makes Abedin's figures appear more visually related to the conventional form of Japanese calligraphy used to depict characters, words, and phrases. Because Abedin was Kibria's teacher, his paintings suggest another source that could have informed the younger artist's later practice. In other words, Kibria's interest in calligraphy did not only emerge from his interaction with Japanese artists or as a result of his time spent in Japan.

Significantly, Abedin also travelled to Japan, though it was not until after he completed the *Famine* series. Further, his travels were not limited to Japan, and the artist also visited North America, Europe and the Soviet Union in the 1950s,³⁹ meaning that like Kibria, an engagement with Japan is an insufficient explanation for understanding Abedin's work. Sanjukta Sunderason's interpretation of *Nabanna* (1970) a scroll painting by Abedin that now hangs at the center of the Bangladesh National Museum's gallery dedicated to the artist, points to the significance of Abedin's use of line, though not strictly in a calligraphic sense. The scroll painting is not monochromatic, but the figures resemble those painted in Abedin's *Famine* series. Sunderason, who describes Abedin as a "highly mobile artist,"⁴⁰ argues that the lines in *Nabanna* are indicative of "loss, return, sowing and reaping," and also that they reflect Abedin's visions of "journeys, continuities and transformations."⁴¹ Sunderason's analysis further suggests that what might be called a calligraphic visuality in Abedin's work is more than an illustration of text, but

³⁹ Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 100.

Sanjukta Sunderason, "Shadow-Lines: Zainul Abedin and the Afterlives of the Bengal Famine of 1943," *Third Text* 31, no. 2-3 (2017): 242. Several of these trips were at least in part sponsored by the Commonwealth, Rockefeller, and Ford Foundations.

⁴⁰ Sunderason, "Shadow-Lines," 242.

⁴¹ Sunderason, "Shadow-Lines," 242.

also more than simply a visual tool or style. Rather, these lines are a metaphor, moving across the surface of his paintings much like he moved around the world.

This interpretation of line can help to expand calligraphic practice to fit a mid-twentieth century Bengali perspective, such as Kibria's *Alphabets*. The lithograph seems to fit somewhere between textual and non-textual forms of calligraphy. Overlaying the orange part of the composition are what we can guess to be letters, given the title of the composition. Yet the figures are not distinct, and do not clearly recall any letters in the Bengali alphabet like Tagore's series does. Although they do not spell out a word or phrase or verse, their positions are not merely decorative. Further, the medium of the piece, a lithograph, suggests an additional connection between word and image. The terms "lithography" and "calligraphy" both imply the act of writing through their shared root word "graph." In doing so, lithography and calligraphy both suggest different approaches to visual writing, the former by carving into stone, mimicking the technical process of writing to produce a visual form, and the latter by illustrating text as a visual form itself. *Alphabets* manipulates both of these processes as it blends the textual and visual, as well as the mechanical and creative aspects of writing. *Alphabets* is a calligraphic image that suggests meaning through an artistic representation of figures that recall letters, even if they do not immediately appear as such. In this way, Kibria's work illustrates an experimentation with calligraphy that had taken on yet another new style and which can help contextualize it in relationship to global modernism of the mid-twentieth century.

Calligraphic Modernism in the 1950s-1970s

While the artistic environment in Bengal provides significant context for Kibria's work, it is also important to consider the development of modern art in Japan at the time the artist studied

there. Abstract art was particularly prevalent during the postwar period in Japan.⁴² One group of artists known as the Bokujinkai sought to establish a distinctly Japanese style by creating works of abstracted calligraphy.⁴³ Through abstraction, these artists complicated the notion of what could qualify as calligraphy, as characters and texts became obscured beyond legibility.⁴⁴ It is unclear if the Bokujinkai directly informed the practice of Kibria or his teachers, however, their work suggests that artists in Japan in the 1950s were concerned with expanding the definitions and applications of calligraphy.

Eugenia Bogdanova-Kummer's scholarship on the Bokujinkai can help explain *Alphabets* as a calligraphic image. The Bokujinkai are a useful example of transnational exchange during the mid-twentieth century both in terms of the types of art they produced as well as how they positioned themselves within a broader context of global modernist art practice. First, in terms of their artistic practice, the Bokujinkai artists sought to use calligraphy not as a way of replicating characters, but as a way of creating abstract paintings that could communicate and contend with the abstract-expressionist painters of Europe and the United States.⁴⁵ The calligraphers asserted that their practice was not limited to a literal depiction of characters and verses. In doing so, the Bokujinkai asserted the unique visual and illustrative qualities of calligraphy. This was an argument based on form and that relied on the calligraphic line's distinguishing feature:

“bringing to the surface something that previously existed only in the human imagination and

⁴² Eugenia Bogdanova-Kummer, “Tatami and Wood: Ink Rubbings and the Discussion of Materiality in Postwar Japanese Calligraphy and Art,” *World Art* 6, no. 2 (July 2016): 270.

⁴³ Eugenia Bogdanova-Kummer, “The Line Between Calligraphy and Painting: A View from Post-War Japan,” in *The Power of Line*, ed. Marzia Faietti and Gerhard Wolf (Munich: Hirmer, 2015), 118.

⁴⁴ Bogdanova-Kummer, “The Line Between Calligraphy and Painting,” 127.

⁴⁵ Bogdanova-Kummer, “The Line Between Calligraphy and Painting,” 118-119.

making it a visible part of the material world—a written artefact.”⁴⁶ In other words, because the calligraphic line had the ability to represent thoughts and words, its application even in compositions devoid of words or letters still operated on the same logic. Bogdanova-Kummer’s comparison of this abstract calligraphy to the work of American abstract-expressionist Franz Kline highlights that the distinction between the two types of art (abstract painting and abstract calligraphy) was not necessarily clear.⁴⁷

The Bokujinkai can provide context for another lithograph of Kibria’s from around the same time as *Alphabets*. The lithograph, *Black & Gray* (created either in 1965 or 1966), presents a more complicated relationship with calligraphy, as its form and title do not overtly suggest such a connection (Figure 7). The work is almost consumed by black brushstrokes. At the top of the composition these black strokes appear to be spread across evenly. Almost half way to the bottom, the strokes begin to loosen and move in different directions before completely giving way to what looks more like drippings of ink than pure brushstrokes. At the same time, when considering the work of Franz Kline in relation to the Bokujinkai’s avant-garde calligraphy,⁴⁸ it is possible to see a connection in these contemporary works through their visible brushstrokes and their experimentations with various media, complicating the notion that either words or images require legibility in order to be expressive. Further, while Kline, the Bokujinkai, and Kibria’s works all complicate the notion of whether there exists a clear distinction between painting, printmaking, and calligraphy, they are related under a framework of calligraphic

⁴⁶ Bogdanova-Kummer, “The Line Between Calligraphy and Painting,” 124-125.

⁴⁷ Bogdanova-Kummer, “The Line Between Calligraphy and Painting,” 120-121.

⁴⁸ Eugenia Bogdanova-Kummer, “Contested Comparisons: Franz Kline and Japanese Calligraphy,” in *In Focus: Meryon 1960-1 by Franz Kline*, ed. AnnMarie Perl (London: Tate Research Publication, 2017), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/meryon/japanese-calligraphy>.

modernism, which can provide a theory for considering artistic exchange that goes beyond Japan and Bengal or Japan and the West.

Calligraphic modernism is theorized by Iftikhar Dadi through the work of artists from North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia in the mid-1950s through mid-1970s. These artists, he explains, challenged the boundaries of Arabic calligraphy's visual qualities and its uses.⁴⁹ In his discussion of these artists, particularly of Ibrahim El Salahi, Dadi examines the ways in which calligraphy took on new meanings as it incorporated visual strategies that included both figuration and abstraction, rather than being solely a vehicle for textual representation.⁵⁰ Calligraphic abstraction, like that seen in the Bokujinkai artists' work, was one approach that artists in the Islamic world utilized in order to assert that Arabic calligraphy could be modern art, as illustrated by artists such as Anwar Jalal Shemza.⁵¹ Of his work Dadi explains: "Shemza re-territorialised the Arabic script, foregrounding its trans-local nature, while making its aesthetic engaging to the outside and thus destabilising simplistic associations between art and nation."⁵² This emphasizes the way in which calligraphy could and did communicate across national borders, or in Dadi's words, "universalize[d]" that which was depicted.⁵³ Significantly, it was not through narrative or realist modes of expression that these works were able to do so, but rather, through their distinctly modern, "dynamic formal composition."⁵⁴ This is significant because it suggests a mode of artistic expression that did not rely naturalism, but instead

⁴⁹ Iftikhar Dadi, "Ibrahim El Salahi and Calligraphic Modernism in a Comparative Perspective," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 3 (2010): 556-559.

⁵⁰ Dadi, "Ibrahim El Salahi," 556. El Salahi's work takes on calligraphy, but also incorporates African sculptural forms.

⁵¹ Dadi, "Ibrahim El Salahi," 559.

⁵² Iftikhar Dadi, "Calligraphic Abstraction: Anwar Jalal Shemza," in *Anwar Jalal Shemza*, ed. Iftikhar Dadi (London, United Kingdom: Ridinghouse, 2015), 14.

⁵³ Dadi, "Ibrahim El Salahi," 555.

⁵⁴ Dadi, "Ibrahim El Salahi," 555.

communicated through its pliable forms. Calligraphic modernism as a framework of analysis implies a type of artistic practice that operates on a relationship between image and word but that does not require literal or legible forms.

Through calligraphic modernism, Dadi argues, artists in North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia engaged with a broader community of Islamic cosmopolitanism that brought them into communication with each other, even if not intentionally so.⁵⁵ Dadi contextualizes these artists in a postcolonial world in which the quest for modes of expression that were not imposed by colonial powers was an increasingly important one,⁵⁶ “as artist’s were expected to produce nothing less than the development of a new cultural language that would exploit the opening provided by decolonization—understood at the time as an opportunity to enact a truly world-historical shift in politics and culture.”⁵⁷ A key component of Dadi’s argument is an understanding that although these artists’ works can be understood to communicate across geographic boundaries imposed by the modern nation-state, it is the very same nation-state that remains an important framework for understanding artistic production, as well as its promotion and consumption.⁵⁸ This negotiation was anything but clearly defined, illustrating the complexities of postcolonial, modern artistic practice that was both transnational and national.

The relationship of the artist and the nation-state in the postcolonial context is constantly shifting, though it remains important even in contemporary contexts. For example, in the context of Kibria’s practice, “Bengal” refers to specific identities at different points throughout the twentieth century, and more specifically at different points in the artist’s career. The politics of

⁵⁵ Dadi, “Ibrahim El Salahi,” 571-572.

⁵⁶ Dadi, “Ibrahim El Salahi,” 560-561.

⁵⁷ Dadi, “Ibrahim El Salahi,” 561.

⁵⁸ Dadi, “Ibrahim El Salahi,” 559-562.

the changing nation-states in South Asia had an impact on regional exchange, at the most basic level because they complicated the compositions and delineations of which actors constituted the region at different points in time. *Alphabets* is again illustrative in this context, particularly because it was created during the decade leading up to Bangladesh's independence from West Pakistan. A significant aspect of the Bangladesh Liberation War was related to language, as the central government, based in West Pakistan, made Urdu the national language of both East and West Pakistan, despite the fact that East Pakistan was a Bengali-speaking region. *Alphabets*, then, in its seemingly unclear depiction of letters or parts of letters, seems to reflect a struggle for an artistic language of expression that was not completely separate from the struggle for a national language.

The discussion of calligraphic modernism as an important method of twentieth century artistic exchange is complicated by notions of identity, both personally and nationally defined. For example, in the context of the Bokujinkai artists, by relying on the forms and tools of their own practice to consider and respond to the artistic practice of their contemporaries, were thoroughly engaged in a transnational dialogue regarding expression.⁵⁹ Through this dialogue, these artists sought to carve out a distinct space for themselves on a global stage. The Bokujinkai's project has resonance with the development of art institutions in postcolonial

⁵⁹ Bogdanova-Kummer, "Contested Comparisons." At the same time, while the Bokujinkai situated themselves within a broader milieu of global modern art and collaborated with Kline, over time both the Japanese artists as well as American critics were reluctant to draw comparisons between abstract calligraphy and abstract painting, highlighting the politicization of transnational artistic exchange in the twentieth century.

Bengal, where the Bangladesh National Museum and Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy have actively engaged in developing a national art historical narrative for the new nation-state.⁶⁰

In 2004, the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy published a monograph of Kibria.⁶¹ In the foreword to this book, written by Ahamad Nazir, then-director of the Academy, Kibria is lauded as a pioneer of modern art in Bangladesh: “Kibria has helped modern art practices in this country assume a distinctive style and identity. He has combined western art traditions with local cultural expressions, taking our art away from pointless imitation of those traditions to a meaningful aesthetic and creative engagement.”⁶² There is an emphasis on Kibria’s novelty and on what makes him an innovator in the art history of Bangladesh. Nazir situates the artist in relation to broader global art practices, including the Neo-Bengal School, impressionism, cubism and abstraction.⁶³ In closing, Nazir remarks on the legacy of Kibria’s practice, which he claims lives on in Bangladeshi artists: “His use of colour, space and texture, his formal and technical innovations—all these remain important signposts to the road of modern art in Bangladesh.”⁶⁴ Kibria is here not only an innovator, but a harbinger of modern art for the new nation-state.

⁶⁰ Enamul Haque, ed. *Bangladesh Lalit Kala: Journal of the Dacca Museum* 1, no. 1 (January 1975). The opening editorial in this journal is an urgent call for a national art historical record as well as supporting institutions dedicated to the study of art history as a discipline.

⁶¹ Syed Manzoorul Islam, *Mohammad Kibria* (Dhaka: Department of Fine Arts, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, 2004).

Diana Campbell Betancourt, “Entry Points: Reconsidering the Asian Art Biennale with Syed Jahangir,” *Post: Notes on Modern and Contemporary Art Around the Globe, Museum of Modern Art*, May 25, 2017, https://post.at.moma.org/content_items/992-entry-points-reconsidering-the-asian-art-biennale-with-syed-jahangir. The Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy was originally formed in 1974, taking over the void left by the East Pakistan Arts Council that had been founded in 1963.

⁶² Islam, *Mohammad Kibria*, 6.

⁶³ Islam, *Mohammad Kibria*, 10-13.

⁶⁴ Islam, *Mohammad Kibria*, 17.

The artist's career, particularly with reference to his time spent in Japan, cannot be seen simply as a continuation or a reflection of the artists from the early twentieth century who engaged with Okakura in Calcutta, nor can it be seen as a completely novel relationship. It is important to consider the historical connection between Bengal and Japan, but it is also necessary to take into account the postcolonial context and the emergence of new nations, which imply that such a network is not fixed geographically, politically, or artistically.

In 1962, the year Kibria returned from Japan, he made *Composition in Black and Yellow* (1962), which provides a surface on which to revisit the artist's work in the middle of the twentieth century (Figure 8). This piece, also a lithograph, was made before the other lithographs that have been discussed in this paper, *Alphabets* and *Black & Gray*. In the earlier piece, a bright yellow background lays the foundation and black ink is marbled on top of the surface. This ink swirls in murky formations, appearing to dance around five circular shapes that spread across the center of the piece. The ink is much looser in its application than the other two lithographs, almost as if it has been watered down or painted on. While these forms may invite a certain type of deciphering, it is not clear if they do so in a calligraphic or an abstract manner. Rather, the piece seems to highlight the similarities between calligraphy and abstraction, recalling the ways in which the Bokujinkai and El Salahi experimented with forms that were beyond an immediate legibility.

Situating *Alphabets* and Kibria's Calligraphic Modernism

While calligraphic practice is most commonly situated within specific Islamic or East Asian contexts, this paper suggests that calligraphic modernism can help illuminate the continuations and transformations of artistic exchange between Bengal and Japan throughout the twentieth century. Rather than reproducing a mid-twentieth century version of Pan-Asianism

under a different name, however, calligraphic modernism can draw illuminating connections between other twentieth-century artistic developments, including global abstraction and transnational modernism. This in turn reinforces a rejection of Pan-Asian idealism being the sole perpetuator of regional or transnational exchange and suggests that a constant, stable network of exchange between Bengal and Japan is an insufficient way of thinking about works such as Kibria's.

At the same time, transnational exchange remains an important factor in considering the development of modernism. In this context, the movement of artists, as well as the experimentation with different forms that reflect this movement, are a significant characteristic of global modernism. The Tansaekhwa, for example, were a group of Korean artists from the 1960s and 1970s who worked primarily in monochrome paintings. In Joan Kee's discussion of one of the Tansaekhwa artists, Lee Ufan, she references the artist's reliance on both points and lines in his work: "Lines are made up of points, which themselves are the moments at which two ontologically discrete agents meet, intersect, or otherwise come into contact."⁶⁵ Kee's interpretation suggests that Ufan's lines represent exchange and communication, and by extension, movement. Her interpretation continues: "Lee took care to emphasize the relationship between each pair of marks so that the pictorial space looks as if it is held together by a force field generated by the energy stemming from the interaction between one point and another."⁶⁶ In this way, Kee provides a formal analysis of Lee's (and by extension, the Tansaekhwa's) abstraction that suggests how this work could be historically specific, globally positioned, and full of meaning despite its initial illegibility.

⁶⁵ Joan Kee, *Contemporary Korean Art: Tansaekhwa and the Urgency of Method* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 29.

⁶⁶ Kee, *Contemporary Korean Art*, 276.

Significantly, some of the Tansaekhwa artists, including Ufan, also trained and worked in Japan, and their engagement with abstraction was not unlike the Bokujinkai's efforts to establish themselves on an international stage.⁶⁷ This was part of a broader period of reconstruction following the Korean War at a time in which several artists in Korea engaged with abstraction.⁶⁸ This too was a thoroughly transnational project, though more so in spirit than in physical movement across borders, for travel outside of Korea during this period was quite complicated and even restricted in some situations.⁶⁹ Kee theorizes the Tansaekhwa artists' practices in the context of their method: "Tansaekhwa was not about the mastery of technique, the transmission of meaning, or even the manipulation of materials. Its makers were primarily concerned with bringing together certain materials and material properties so as to break the painting down."⁷⁰ Kee's interpretation suggests how we might interpret the works by Tansaekhwa artists as emphasizing making and movement at the same time as they challenge stability and clear communication. This reinforces Kee's idea about lines as metaphors of exchange and can provide a foundation for thinking about Kibria's work and calligraphic modernism in the context of regional artistic exchange, not unlike Sunderason's analysis of Abedin's use of line. Significantly, Kee's analysis is not purely formal or purely contextual, a false opposition that she claims has plagued art history of the non-West.⁷¹ This emphasizes that transnational, global art did not necessitate the synthesis of essentialized, national styles. At the same time, it was through an experimentation with various materials that the Tansaekhwa artists reconsidered painting, which recalls Kibria's experimentation with calligraphy, painting, and printmaking.

⁶⁷ Kee, *Contemporary Korean Art*, 4, 7-8.

⁶⁸ Kee, *Contemporary Korean Art*, 7.

⁶⁹ Kee, *Contemporary Korean Art*, 8.

⁷⁰ Kee, *Contemporary Korean Art*, 4.

⁷¹ Kee, *Contemporary Korean Art*, 290.

At first glance *Alphabets* appears to be unknowable or undecipherable, as it labels itself with a promise of letters but resists any explicit representation of them. In 2018, the lithograph was hung as a part of an exhibition at the Dhaka Art Summit titled *Planetary Planning*. The curator for the show, Devika Singh, explains her interest in highlighting art and artists who traveled and worked around the globe, stating: “Against this complex and historically unequal canvas of exchanges but also of imaginary ‘immobile movement’ to use Edouard Glissant’s term, artists have projected alternative, at times utopian thinking, and located themselves within it.”⁷² This statement suggests the significance of mobility in the context of the exhibition, but it also implies the ways in which artists exercised agency by participating in cross-cultural exchanges.

This paper suggests that mobility and agency, so central to the initiation and continuation of transnational artistic networks, is also a critical component of calligraphic modernism. By drawing on calligraphic visuality, artists in the mid-twentieth century, including Kibria, were not limited to a set of national artistic styles or methods. They engaged with a style of visual representation that was derived from an illustration of text but which proved that it could also be independent of it as well. By considering the relationship between calligraphy and abstraction, this paper pushes back on an interpretation of mid-twentieth century artistic practice in Bengal being defined by artistic practices that rested on social realism. Rather, as Kibria’s pieces from the 1950s through 1970s illustrate, these works could be both national and transnational, figural and abstract, textual and visual. Calligraphic modernism both inspired and represented travels, exchanges, and communication between artists and across borders, the result of which was a

⁷² Devika Singh, “Planetary Planning” in Dhaka Art Summit Program (2018), 248.

unique form of visual expression that asserted historically specific locations within global modernism.

This paper has considered the ontological, visual, and mobile characteristics of calligraphy, suggesting imbued meanings that go beyond definitions of words or phrases. It is in this context that *Alphabets* seems to try and write its own narrative on the surface of the lithograph—perhaps illegibly, perhaps incompletely. In this state of illegibility and incompleteness, however, it is possible that we can better imagine the complex trajectories of the artist’s career, which cannot be described completely by either his institutional background or his travels abroad. Unlike written accounts of Bangladesh’s national art history, Kibria’s lithograph invites us to picture how that history was formed: by movement, by exchange, and by communication. Although the introduction to this paper suggested that Kibria’s lithograph *Alphabets* exists in a state of suspension due to its illegibility, perhaps it is more appropriate to consider this work as moving between states of legibility. In this way, the work itself seems to be constantly rewriting its own narrative.

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Fig. 7: Mohammad Kibria, *Black & gray*, 1966, lithograph. Reproduction from Syed Manzoorul Islam, *Mohammad Kibria*, Dhaka: Department of Fine Arts, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, 2004.

Fig. 8: Mohammad Kibria, *Composition in black and yellow*, 1962, lithograph. Reproduction from Syed Manzoorul Islam, *Mohammad Kibria*, Dhaka: Department of Fine Arts, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, 2004.

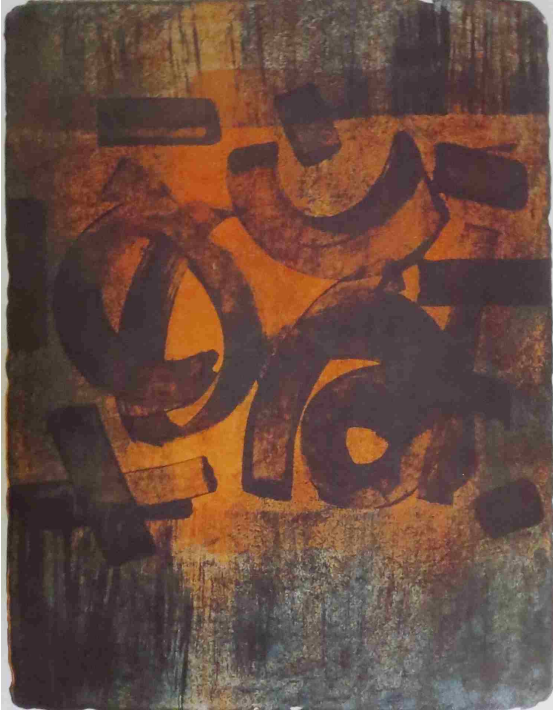


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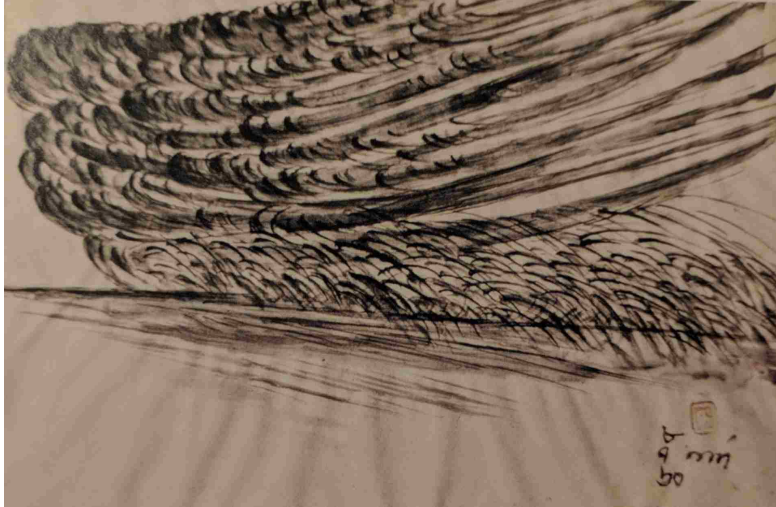


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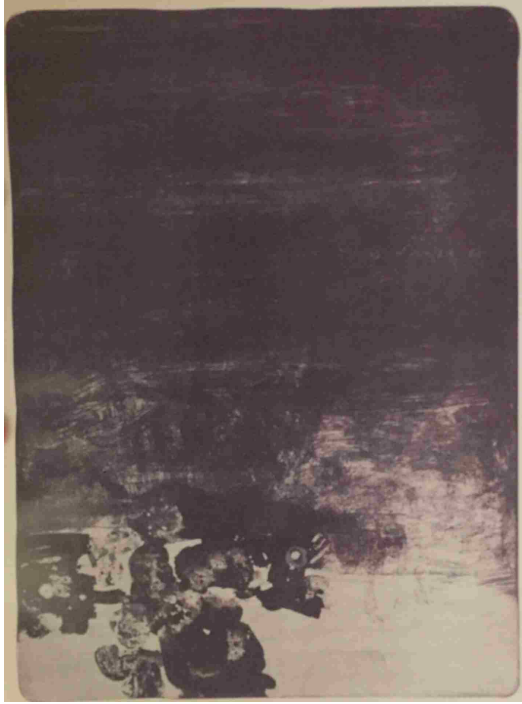


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Fig. 8: Mohammad Kibria, *Composition in black and yellow*, 1962, lithograph. Reproduction from Syed Manzoorul Islam, *Mohammad Kibria*, Dhaka: Department of Fine Arts, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, 2004.

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