

Deconstructing Abul Barq Alvi: Philosophy, Technique, and Artistic Expression

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Abstract

Abul Barq Alvi, a distinguished contemporary artist from Bangladesh, embodies a multifaceted identity as a freedom fighter, educator, and socially conscious individual. Having joined the Department of Printmaking under the Faculty of Fine Arts in 1972, Alvi dedicated a significant part of his life to nurturing generations of students, leaving an indelible mark as both a mentor and a practitioner. The dual identities of "Teacher Alvi" and "Artist Alvi" emerge as seamlessly intertwined, reflecting his holistic engagement with art, pedagogy, and society. Renowned for his painterly approach to printmaking, Alvi's artistic oeuvre reveals a profound connection with nature. This intrinsic engagement with the natural world permeates both his abstract and realistic works, highlighting his belief in nature's pivotal role as an artistic muse. The present study examines the evolution of his artistic practice, with a focus on the philosophical underpinnings and technical innovations that have defined his body of work. Central to this exploration is the interplay between abstraction and representation in his art, which encapsulates his personal and collective experiences, including his direct involvement in Bangladesh's Liberation War. Alvi's contributions to the field of contemporary printmaking underscore his unique stylistic approach, where painterly techniques are adapted to the medium of printmaking. This synthesis demonstrates a continuity of form and thought, bridging his practices in painting and printmaking. His work exemplifies a philosophical shift over time, reflecting broader socio-political and cultural transformations. By analyzing the chronological development of his artistic journey, this study seeks to illuminate the nuanced intersections between his personal ideology, historical context, and creative processes. Through a critical discourse on abstraction and its philosophical dimensions in Alvi's work, this research not only documents the evolution of his artistic language but also positions his contributions as a significant chapter in the narrative of Bangladeshi art. This study offers valuable insights for current and future generations, providing a comprehensive understanding of Alvi's enduring legacy and the philosophical framework underpinning his art.

Key words: Abul Barq Alvi, Printmaking, Abstract Art, Techniques, Artistic Evolution.

Introduction

Abul Barq Alvi is a prominent contemporary artist from Bangladesh, celebrated for his multifaceted identity as an artist, freedom fighter, and social advocate. A graduate of the Faculty of Fine Arts in 1968, Alvi initially embraced a representational approach in his art, reflecting the stylistic inclinations of his time. His work from this early period often leaned toward impressionistic interpretations, prioritizing subjective impressions over strict adherence to objective representation. This approach marked the foundation of his artistic journey, which evolved significantly after the Liberation War of 1971.

Nature has been a central theme in Alvi's oeuvre, serving as both inspiration and subject. In his perspective, nature encompasses the fundamental essence of artistic creation, a belief that resonates across his abstract and realistic works. Alvi's artistic philosophy draws intriguing parallels with Plato's theory of *Art and Imitation*, as articulated in *The Republic*. According to Plato, art imitates life, with artistic creations functioning as reflections of forms and events (Fazal, 2005). Similarly, Alvi perceives nature as the ultimate source of all forms, aligning his creative ideology with this classical philosophical framework.

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The primary aim of this study is to explore the evolution and philosophical dimensions of Alvi's artistic practice. It seeks to trace the transformations in his approach over time, analyzing how he integrates various techniques to articulate his ideas. Although rooted in the abstract, Alvi's works often evoke the enigmatic qualities of nature and its multifaceted forms. His artistic journey, marked by extensive experimentation in printmaking, demonstrates his commitment to forging a distinct visual language, one that reflects his personal vision and deep engagement with the medium.

This paper endeavors to shed light on the shifts in Alvi's artistic philosophy and practice, offering a critical understanding of his contributions to Bangladeshi art. His ability to transcend conventional boundaries and create an art world uniquely his own underscores the enduring significance of his work.

1.1 Abul Barq Alvi's artworks in Pre-Liberation War

Abul Barq Alvi's artistic practice during the pre-Liberation War period reflects a profound engagement with nature, not merely as a subject but as a medium for personal expression. His landscapes, while inspired by natural forms, do not adhere to direct replication. Instead, they embody an impressionistic ethos, prioritizing emotional resonance over strict fidelity to reality. Alvi's emphasis on light and shade is particularly notable, often employing warm hues—such as yellow—to evoke the brilliance and vitality of sunlight. This approach imbues his works with a sense of atmospheric depth and emotive intensity, distinguishing them from conventional representations of nature.

In this period, Alvi demonstrated a developing artistic individuality, an essential hallmark of a mature artist. Just as Pablo Picasso's distinct style is immediately recognizable, regardless of the phase or medium, Alvi's evolving style establishes his unique artistic identity. Picasso's Cubism, characterized by the deconstruction of form into geometric planes, showcased an individualistic interpretation within the broader framework of the movement ("Pablo Picasso," 2023). Similarly, Alvi's work reflects a personal approach that diverges from imitation and embraces a transformative vision of nature.

This individuality is critical to Alvi's legacy, positioning him as an artist capable of transcending stylistic conventions while maintaining a coherent and recognizable artistic voice. Even in his early works, there is evidence of his ability to innovate within established paradigms, foreshadowing the later evolution of his distinct aesthetic sensibility.

Figure Composition



Figure 1

Figure Composition is an oil painting created by Abul Barq Alvi during his student years, currently housed in the National Museum of Bangladesh. This artwork features a female figure as its central subject, rendered with a stylistic influence of Impressionism. In this composition, Alvi masterfully employs a harmonious interplay of colors, primarily red and green—contrasting hues that traditionally evoke tension. However, Alvi transcends this conventional dynamic, achieving a remarkable balance that lends the painting a serene yet vibrant quality. This delicate equilibrium between contrasting tones introduces a sophisticated visual depth, showcasing the artist's early ability to manipulate color relationships to enhance the emotional and aesthetic resonance of his work.



Figure 1(1)



Figure 2

In the background of the figure, the use of brushstrokes reflects a technique reminiscent of Impressionist art. Two key characteristics of Impressionism are evident in this painting. First, the use of short and loose brushstrokes, which convey a sense of movement and spontaneity. Second, the brightness of the imagery, achieved through the careful interplay of light and color. These features are prominently visible in the composition, suggesting a lingering influence of Impressionist techniques on Abul Barq Alvi's early work (*Impressionism*, 2023).

1. 2 Influence of Japanese society on Abul Barq Alvi's philosophical output

Change is inherently visual—what we perceive influences not only our work but also our worldview. During his stay in Japan from 1983 to 1984, artist Abul Barq Alvi experienced a transformative period where the exhibitions he attended and cultural elements he encountered left a lasting impression. These visual stimuli subtly influenced his art. As Rabindranath Tagore stated, "Art is an expression of human emotion, and emotion is indispensable to art" (Bukhari, Z, 2019, p.6). This philosophy resonates deeply with Alvi's approach, as his work consistently embodies his emotional and intellectual responses to his surroundings.

In Alvi's case, this visual exploration also extended beyond nature to include changing societal conditions. Change in art does not occur by force; it emerges organically through observation and lived experience. Just as the industrial revolution after World War II altered the visual language of art worldwide, the societal and cultural shifts that Alvi witnessed in Japan catalyzed a change in his thought processes and artistic output. This phenomenon parallels the narrative-driven works of other Bangladeshi artists, such as Zainul Abedin, whose famine sketches poignantly captured the collective trauma of their time.

Likewise, Alvi's artworks, while predominantly centered on nature, occasionally reveal other influences, such as the liberation war and societal transformations. These thematic elements, though not permanent, emerge as significant motifs reflecting specific moments in his artistic

journey. This interplay of influences underscores the dynamic relationship between the artist's environment, philosophy, and evolving practice.

1.3 Abul Barq Alvi's artworks in Post-Liberation War

Art evolves, driven by the desire for change and renewal. This holds true for artist Abul Barq Alvi, whose work underwent notable shifts following the Liberation War of Bangladesh. While the war did not directly dominate his printmaking practice, it found subtle expression in his drawings, illustrations, and book covers. A profound example is his *Graveyard* series, which reflects the context of the Liberation War.

Although the war's influence in Alvi's work is often understated, its silent resonance is undeniable. Artist Kamruzzaman Sagar aptly remarked in an interview, "Art is a silent medium; it is not a movie or a document" (Sagar, K, Personal interview, 2023). This observation underscores the idea that Alvi's engagement with the war was implicit rather than overt. The terrain of Bangladesh, a recurring element in his compositions, becomes a metaphorical landscape imbued with a deep love for his country and a consciousness shaped by the war's legacy.

Further, artist Jhoton Chandra Roy highlighted another layer of meaning in Alvi's work: "Through Alvi's art, the horror of war becomes more noticeable than an abstract emotional response" (Chandra Roy, J., Personal interview, 2023). This sentiment reflects how Alvi's patriotic sensibilities and experiences as a freedom fighter permeate his work, not as explicit narratives but as a silent and pervasive presence.

Ultimately, Alvi's post-Liberation War works embody a duality—while they explore universal themes, they are deeply rooted in the national ethos. His artistic construction processes remain aesthetically rich, resonating with the collective memory and emotional landscape of Bangladesh. The subtle interplay of abstraction and representation in his work illustrates how historical events can shape an artist's philosophy and creative practice without dominating their visual vocabulary.

In this context, artist Jhoton Chandra Roy said in an interview that through the work of artist Abul Barq Alvi, it can be seen that the horror of war is more noticeable than the abstract feeling that can be noticed in his work (Chandra Roy, J, Personal interview, 2023). Consequently, it can be said that his work has been influenced more as a patriot than a freedom fighter.

Graveyard



Figure 3

This phase of Abul Barq Alvi's artistic journey marked the transition from realism to abstraction. His earlier works adhered to realistic representation, but the *Graveyard* series, created between 1972 and 1973, signals the beginning of his abstract exploration. The series, rooted in the harrowing context of the Liberation War, reflects the emotional and psychological weight of that period.

The imagery of the *Graveyard* series, with its haunting undertones, was likely inspired by the overwhelming sight of countless dead bodies—a grim reality of the war. Alvi's choice to "break the form" in these works represents not only an aesthetic shift but also a means to process and express the collective trauma of the nation. This act of abstraction allowed him to transcend literal representation, offering a more profound and universal commentary on the devastation of war.

Through this series, Alvi began forging a new artistic identity, one that embraced abstraction as a powerful tool to convey complex emotions and historical narratives. It marked a pivotal moment in his career, laying the foundation for his subsequent explorations in abstract and philosophical themes.



Figure 3(1)



Figure 4

In *Graveyard*, Abul Barq Alvi employs figures that deviate from naturalistic representation, creating a novel structural approach reminiscent of Cubism. The figures in these works embody a deliberate abstraction, where form is fragmented and reassembled to evoke emotional and conceptual depth. This stylistic tendency aligns with the structural innovations seen in Mohammad Kibria's *Boy with Flowers* (Choudhury, S., 2004), particularly in their shared approach to breaking form.

Both artists embrace a cubic sensibility, manipulating shape and perspective to achieve a layered and textured composition. The resemblance in their methodologies reveals a common artistic pursuit of abstraction through structural reinvention. However, despite these similarities, each artist maintains a distinct voice within this framework. While Alvi's work in *Graveyard* carries the weight of post-Liberation War reflections, emphasizing themes of loss and reconstruction, Kibria's *Boy with Flowers* explores abstraction through more introspective and poetic lenses.



Figure 5

The comparison between Abul Barq Alvi's *Graveyard* and Mohammad Kibria's *Graveyard* (Figure 5) highlights intriguing similarities, particularly in their thematic content and stylistic approach. Both works tackle themes of loss and death, a reflection of the socio-political turmoil in

Bangladesh, especially in the wake of the Liberation War. The subject matter in both pieces focuses on graveyards, serving as a poignant metaphor for the casualties of war and the devastating human cost.

Despite these thematic parallels, there are notable differences in the evolution of the two artists' work. Kibria's *Graveyard* was created during his early figurative period, before he fully embraced abstraction, while Alvi's *Graveyard* marks a transitional phase in his own artistic journey from realism to abstraction.

1.4 Philosophical and Abstract Evolution of Abul Barq Alvi

The artistic journey of an individual is deeply influenced by personal experiences, the environment, and the practice that shapes their identity. Abul Barq Alvi's evolution as an artist embodies this journey, reflecting his constant pursuit of innovation and self-expression. His transition from realism to abstraction, particularly in both his paintings and printmaking, was driven by his continuous exploration of form, color, and nature.

Alvi's work has always been profoundly inspired by nature, which he views not as mere objects or landscapes, but as dynamic forms. When observing nature, he does not perceive a tree as a tree, or a figure as merely human; instead, he sees them as geometric forms that can be restructured and reinterpreted. This philosophical approach to art allows Alvi to manipulate and break down forms, exploring the inner structure of nature rather than merely replicating its outward appearance.

His approach to landscape, for example, is not an attempt to replicate reality. Instead, Alvi dissects and rearranges the elements of the landscape into abstracted forms, transforming the scene into a visual composition rather than a direct representation. In his works, the house becomes a square, a tree transforms into a geometrical shape, and nature's fluidity is translated into fixed structures.

In an interview, Alvi shared that when he simplifies nature, he discovers patterns of vertical and horizontal forms. These elements of nature, when abstracted, reveal a deeper order and rhythm. This process of simplification allows him to extract the essential essence of the natural world, which then becomes the foundation of his abstract works. Alvi also mentioned that traveling by train or plane would expose him to different color palettes in nature, which would further influence his artistic choices (Barq Alvi, A, Personal interview, 2023).

His initial move toward abstraction was influenced by Cubism, with its focus on fragmented, multi-perspective views of the subject. However, over time, Alvi's work began to diverge from the strict geometries of Cubism, incorporating a more organic and fluid approach. He started to develop his unique style, where color and form worked in harmony to reflect his own inner emotions and perceptions of the world. Colors such as blue, green, and light tones became prominent in his works, each chosen not arbitrarily but in response to his emotional and philosophical reflections on life and nature.

Alvi's perspective on color is deeply tied to human nature. He believes that the colors and textures in an artwork cannot be forced; they arise naturally from the artist's emotional and psychological state. As he explains, a mild-mannered person might attempt to express fierceness, but such an expression would be fleeting and eventually revert to its original, calmer state. This understanding of human nature is reflected in Alvi's work, where the color, texture, and composition emerge organically, mirroring the artist's inner truth and preferences.

In conclusion, Abul Barq Alvi's journey through abstraction was not merely a technical shift but a philosophical one, where his deep connection to nature and his personal reflections on form, color, and emotion shaped the evolution of his art. Rather than forcing a change, Alvi's work evolved naturally, prioritizing his authentic voice over external influences or expectations. His art continues to reflect his individuality, merging personal expression with the universal language of form and color.

1.5 Using the concept of abstraction in printmaking and painting

The works of Abul Barq Alvi provide a significant insight into the concept of modern painting and printmaking, particularly through his use of abstraction. His ability to work spontaneously in both painting and printmaking allows him to convey emotions and ideas with equal intensity, despite the distinct techniques inherent in each medium. This seamless integration of spontaneous expression in both forms showcases his mastery and innovative approach, as he transfers the same philosophical and emotional depth from one medium to another.

In the context of industrial progress, Alvi's work can also be seen as a response to rapid change, both globally and locally. In countries like Bangladesh, where societal and technological shifts have occurred at a pace faster than in Europe, the flow of ideas and styles has been significantly influenced by the exposure to international exhibitions and travels. Alvi, having witnessed these global shifts, brought back new insights into his practice, infusing his work with fresh perspectives and innovative techniques. The influence of these experiences can be observed in the evolution of his printmaking and painting, where a distinct modern style emerged that blended both local and global artistic trends.

Alvi's commitment to innovation in his art is evident in both his printmaking and painting. Through abstraction, he explores the inner essence of nature and the human experience, utilizing the language of abstraction to transcend realistic representation. His approach to printmaking, though rooted in tradition, incorporates this modern understanding of abstraction, allowing for a unique fusion of form, texture, and color. This can be seen in how he distills the subject matter into geometric shapes, simplifying nature into its most elemental forms, and translating these abstractions into the texture and structure of his prints.

Ultimately, Alvi's work serves as a testament to the potential of abstraction to transform both painting and printmaking. His ability to adapt and innovate within each medium reflects the broader evolution of contemporary Bangladeshi art, where traditional forms of expression are constantly reimagined through personal interpretation and global influences.

1.5.1 Composition



Figure 6

This painting titled *Composition* by artist Abul Barq Alvi, created using gouache, demonstrates the artist's continuous exploration of abstraction through a deep engagement with nature. In this work, Alvi employs green, a color that can symbolize grass or nature, yet it transcends its representational use. Much like Abstract Expressionists, who used colors to evoke rather than replicate objects, Alvi's use of green here represents a form that is subjective and open to interpretation, rather than a direct depiction of nature. This approach invites the viewer to experience the artwork on a sensory and emotional level, allowing them to engage with the image without the need for recognizable forms.

A defining characteristic of abstract art, as seen in Alvi's *Composition*, is the ability to captivate the viewer's attention without clear representation. The absence of a recognizable figure or object doesn't detract from the painting's power; instead, it draws us into an experiential connection with the work, evoking a sense of meaning that goes beyond mere visual recognition. The viewer's search for connection with the abstract forms becomes an integral part of the artistic experience.

In terms of technique, Alvi's *Composition* stands out due to its transparency and layered structure. Despite the central transparency of the painting, multiple layers of gouache create depth within the work. These layers, both translucent and distinct, contribute to the sense of space and dimension, emphasizing the artist's skill in using color and texture to generate complexity. As noted by artist Palash Baran Biswas, one of the key features of Alvi's work is its balance, which not only enhances the visual appeal but also deepens the viewer's engagement with the piece (Baran Biswas, P, Personal interview, 2023).

This layering technique, coupled with the seamless transition from one form to another, reflects Alvi's commitment to a cohesive visual language. The forms in the painting are interlinked in a way that suggests fluidity, creating a dynamic relationship between the parts. This principle of connectedness in composition is also evident in Alvi's printmaking works, where the same balance, transparency, and layering can be observed, highlighting the consistency in his artistic approach across different mediums.

1.5.2 Untitled



Figure 7

Artist Abul Barq Alvi's approach to both painting and printmaking is deeply interconnected, with distinctive features from one medium seamlessly carrying over into the other. His gouache works, such as *Composition*, and his printmaking pieces demonstrate a shared methodology and philosophy, revealing a cohesive artistic identity. One of the most prominent commonalities

between his painting and printmaking is his use of layers, a technique that adds depth and complexity to his work in both forms. In his gouache paintings, Alvi creates multiple transparent layers that enhance the depth of the image, while in his printmaking, similar layering techniques are evident, resulting in a similarly rich visual experience.

Alvi's use of line and form in his paintings is mirrored in his printmaking, showcasing his ability to break down and transform natural forms into abstract structures across different mediums. However, there is a noticeable distinction between the two: Alvi's printmaking often features a greater emphasis on texture, something that is less prevalent in his paintings. The textures in his prints contribute a tactile quality to the work, adding an additional dimension that engages the viewer on a sensory level. These textures, though not as prominent in his painting, enhance the emotional resonance of his printmaking, creating a feeling of depth and materiality.

As artist Rokonuzzaman Uzzal aptly stated, "who paints well can-do printmaking well, and who doesn't paint well can't do printmaking well" (Uzzal, R, Personal interview, 2023). Alvi's expertise in painting allows him to transfer his nuanced understanding of form, composition, and texture into his printmaking, proving his proficiency in both media. Alvi's belief in freedom as an artist underpins his work, allowing him to approach both painting and printmaking with a similar philosophy: a blend of attraction and non-objectivity. This freedom allows him to experiment and innovate, creating a unique identity that transcends medium-specific boundaries.

In his interviews, Alvi described how his forms emerge spontaneously, particularly in his abstract works. He explained that during printmaking, he often adjusts the composition based on test prints, adding or altering forms as needed (Barq Alvi, A, Personal interview, 2023). This iterative and spontaneous approach is consistent with his process in painting, where he continuously adapts and responds to the evolving image. This shared process of intuitive decision-making ties his printmaking and painting practices together, demonstrating that despite the differences in technique, the underlying creative process remains the same. Thus, Alvi's works—whether in painting or printmaking—are united by his commitment to artistic freedom, experimentation, and the continual evolution of his forms.

Conclusion

Printmaking, as a medium, offers artists a vast scope for experimentation and refinement of technique, and Abul Barq Alvi's work exemplifies this dynamic. As both a printmaker and painter, Alvi's art integrates diverse technical aspects of printmaking with his painting and book illustration, creating a harmonious blend of traditional and innovative practices. His printmaking has been influenced by his earlier paintings, allowing his artistic language to develop and evolve seamlessly across mediums.

Alvi's paintings, characterized by delicate compositions and an understated color scheme, reflect his serene demeanor and quiet introspection. His use of color, subtle and restrained, mirrors his guarded nature and deep connection to the land and rivers of Bangladesh. These connections have significantly shaped his artistic journey, inspiring the development of an original abstract aesthetic rooted in the environment he so deeply feels. His abstract works emerge through the use of geometry and organically shaped environments that are free-flowing and yet meticulously constructed, embodying the balance of nature in his forms.

This study not only brings together the continuity of Alvi's technical approach but also highlights the innovative directions and techniques he explored throughout his career. His commitment to experimentation has had a lasting impact on contemporary printmaking practice, as he continually sought to integrate new methods and express the complexities of his environment.

Through a chronological analysis of his work, this research reveals both the philosophical evolution and technical advancements that have shaped Alvi's artistic output. The changes in his life and the socio-political landscape are mirrored in the progression of his work, reinforcing the dynamic relationship between his personal experiences and his creative practice.

By examining Abul Barq Alvi's work in its entirety, this study not only documents his contributions to printmaking and painting but also preserves the evolution of his thought and technique over time. Alvi's innovative approach to combining different mediums and experimenting with forms stands as a testament to the power of artistic freedom and its ability to reflect deeper philosophical and cultural narratives.

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