BNU

Dissecting Typographic Understanding & Pedagogy: *A Rift between The East and The West*

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Abstract

Are Typography Design students at BNU, SVAD well equipped to design Urdu Typography, or, is there a rift between the two? This research paper, firstly, attempts to identify the myriad forces at play in our understanding of Typography, its application (in teaching and learning), aesthetic, and sensibility. Reflecting upon firstly, my practice as a typographer and typography educator, I attempt to not only dissect my pedagogical approach towards teaching Typography but also aim to analyze and critically reflect on the work being produced as a result of my practice in the classroom. I intend to draw parallels between international typographic standards and our local Typographic aesthetic while trying to observe in what ways may they influence one another. Through this correlation, I aim to be more inclusive of our Urdu Typography and Perso-Arabic Scripts as a whole with regards to Typography and its teaching.

Keywords: Typography, Visual Design, Design-Teaching, Western Typography, Urdu Typography, Andragogy.

Dissecting Typographic Understanding: *__A Rift between the East and the West.__*

With the ushering in of this decade of the 2020s, **Pakistan** still stands at a metaphorical

crossroads in regards to its cultural identity - shackled between a *Mughal/ Indo-centric past* and

a *Neo-Islamist technological future.* This amalgamation of multiple identities and intelligence,

one which we are active participants of, is evident in everything we do as a Nation. From the

clothes we wear to the languages we speak, our output both locally and internationally portrays

these multiple identities and socio-cultural 'inconsistencies' glaringly.

Now contextually, we're often inclined to think that said inconsistencies result in chaos. We feel

that this multiplicity is invalid, to say the least, it is a glitch in the system that we must

voluntarily erase. We feel that this multiplicity in our identity is not who we truly are, but a

subverted version of our own culture. This so-called subversion in our culture can be traced

back to dictatorships, time, media (and it's entailing devices), and sense-less importation of

other cultures vis-a-vis globalization. At present, these inconsistencies can be explained through

the concept of duality, an ideological binary that separates the East from the West.

This East VS. West duality affects the rationale of this paper in numerous ways. Primarily, the

aforementioned duality is present in the higher education Design curriculum practiced in

Pakistan, and more specifically, BNU SVAD. As a Design-Practitioner and an Artist-Teacher, I

find an enormous gap that exists between what is produced (typographically) within the four

walls of a Bachelor's Design Studio **(Fig. 1)** and what exists within the broader spectrum of

society, locally. **(Fig. 2)**

Fig. 1 Photo by Umair Abbasi - SVAD Open Day '19. Works by my Typography 2nd Year

Studio.

Fig 2. Photo by Zachary Williams 'Orphaned Nation - Lahore's Old Anarkali Food Street'

Hence, through this essay, I intend to address this gap concerning my specialization in

Typography and its teaching. I plan on using this binary to my benefit, and ultimately, intend to

use this gap as a building block to further aid my practice and teaching of Typography.

However, before I delve further into this essay and address some of these concerns further, I

want to talk about the lens through which I view this selected topic.

As a practicing typographer over the last 5 years, my practice revolves around understanding and implementing contemporary western typographic traditions and infusing them hues from our local vernacular. **(Fig.3)**
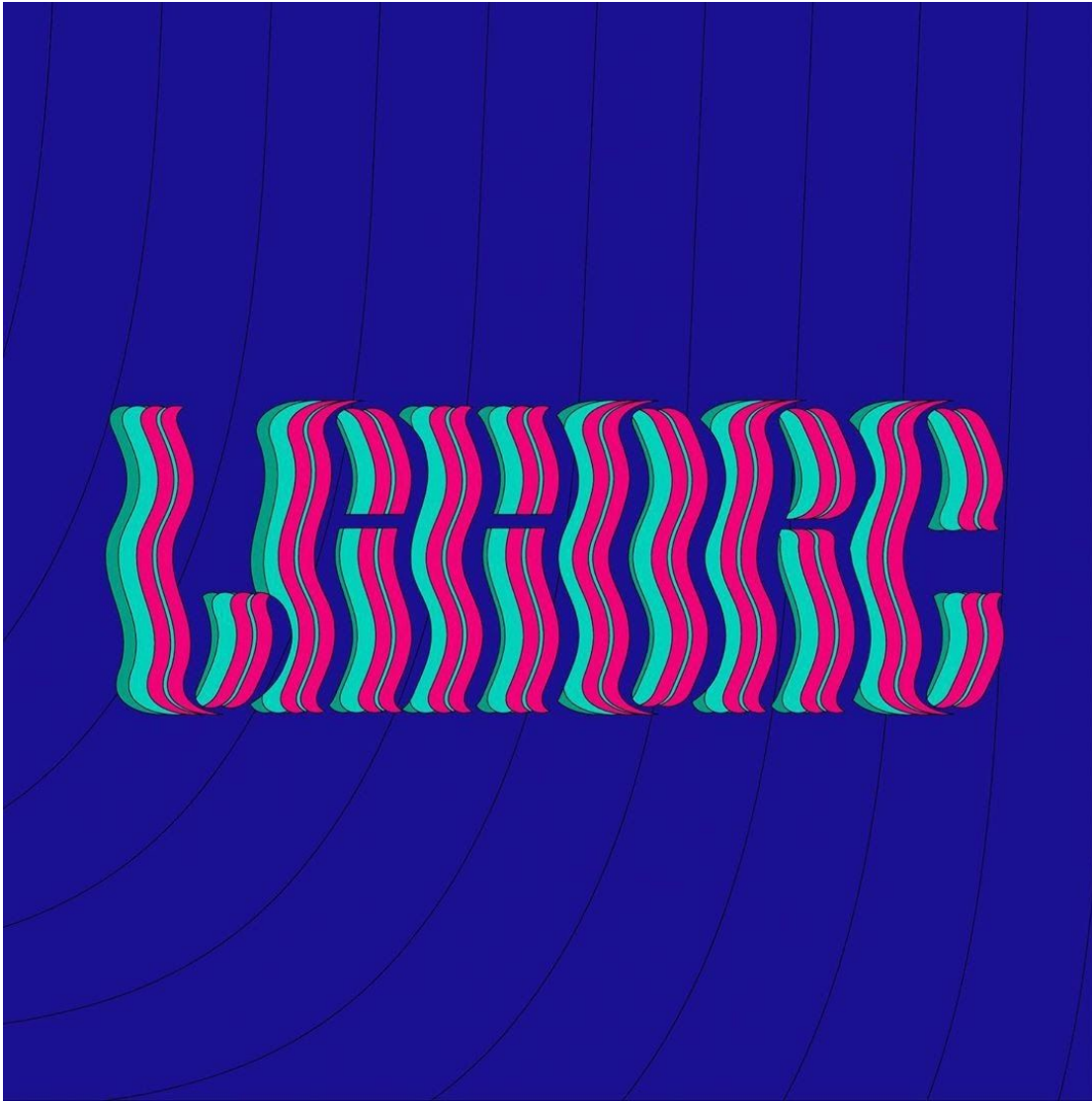
(Fig. 3 L A H O R E - Umair Abbasi © 2020)

As a typographer, dialogue and discourse are two key elements of my process. These processes further inform my designs in the form of discourses I have with both, my peers and my students. Peer-Learning also aids in the formation of Multiple Intelligences according to *Gardner (1989) who states that our 6th Intelligence is Interpersonal* - dealing with the attitudes and abilities that an individual develops in a socially interactive environment. Such claims are also mirrored by other Social Constructivist Theorists such as Martin Nystrand and Colin B. Grant.

According to the Social Constructivist and cognitive theories put forward by theorist Martin Nystrand [1], on average, American Instructors do not favour discourse within the classroom, which results in an environment that is not favourable to peer-focused social constructivist learning. In the words of Nystrand: *"Teachers who teach as if they value what their students think create learners."*

The above statement is particularly true, as one of the things that shapes our typographic understanding is being able to learn through social experiences. As individuals and creative thinkers ourselves, we *must* be permeable to newer methods and creative practices. This social interaction is important for contemporary Typographic practices, where a broad chunk of our inspiration comes from Western Typographic behemoths such as Germany, Switzerland and France.

At this point, I would also address the eastern and western binary that I referred to earlier, which exists between eastern and western typography. I highlight this binary through the following works produced in my typography class **(Fig. 4 & Fig 5.)**

*(Fig. 4 Typography by Tahreem Nawaz)*
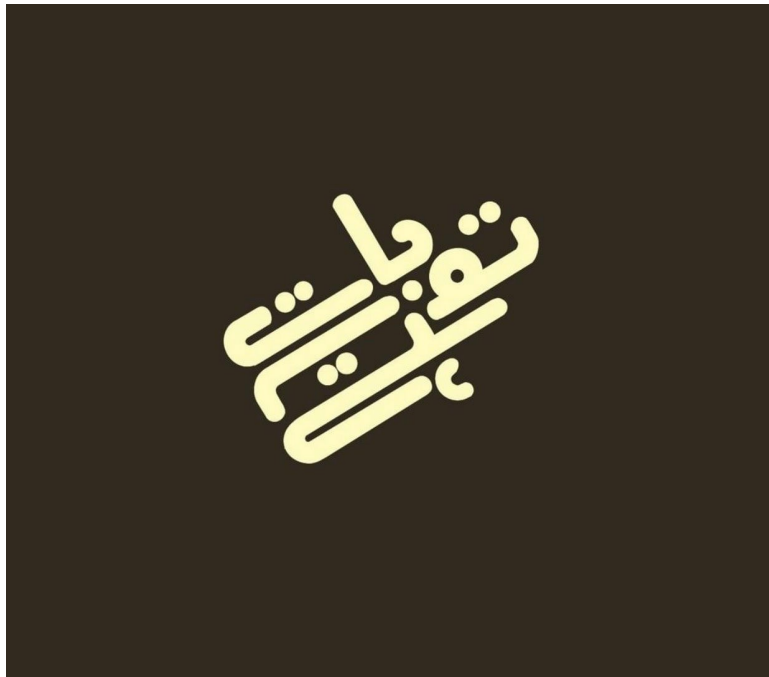
(Fig. 5 Typography by Ayesha Aslam)

The above two Urdu Typographic works are by students who were from their 3rd semester as a part of my Typography Class. These two works show that our understanding of Urdu Typography is still very rigid/grid oriented, despite being in contemporary times. Our understanding of Western Typography, as shown in the examples below, breaks grid systems, anatomical rules, boundaries and binaries, while being practiced in the same environment. The following images were produced in the same typography class, which I believe depict this experimental nature of anatomy a bit more evidently. **(Fig. 6 & Fig 7)**
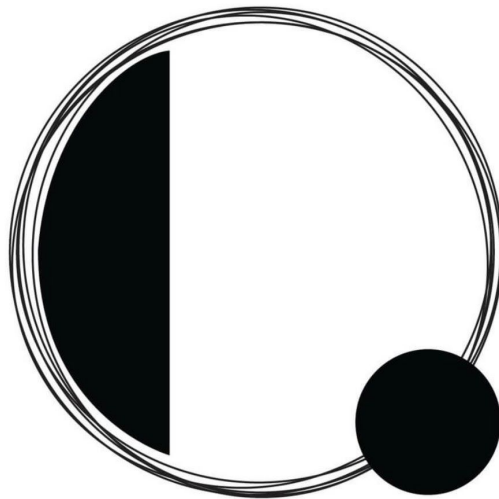
(Fig 6 - Duaa Kundi's Experimental Q)
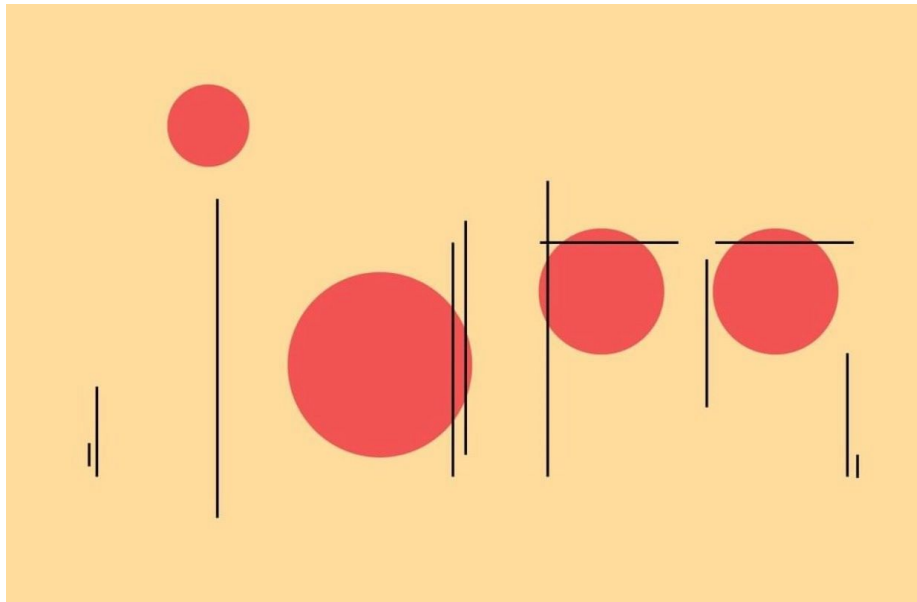
(Fig 7 - Maryam Tanveer's Typography)

This makes me reflect upon my own pedagogical approach holistically; to what extent is my pedagogical approach directly involved in production of such diverse works of Type?

Here, I address two other important concerns as well; ***why and how?***

How can the earlier binary that I stated be related to the multi-faceted experiences of my classroom? Why are social interactions and experiences shaping the way in which my students are developing and designing typography? Through analysing the work being produced, can we see what forces are at play here?

To analyze this further, I use the hypothesis provided by Burton J. (1981) Developing Minds. [2]

In her paper Burton states that adolescents are actively shaping their experiences through their art-making, they organize, order, select and shape, in a cyclical manner. Adolescent art hence,

becomes a period of creative inquiry. This inquiry can subsequently be observed through the

works created by adolescent minds. Whereas my student-body comprises young adults, I have

felt similar tendencies in their art-making process. I would like to further elaborate on the

process of designing in my class - from my own observation and analysis.

Analysis

The first step is task identification; what have the students been 'tasked to design.' This step

comprises understanding the task brief provided to them through peer discussion and analysis.

Their various ideas and beliefs come together through discourse and aids their comprehension of

this task. This is where I identify one concern. Ideation is a common practice amongst artists,

designers, creatives etc. Whereas ideation can bring multiple solutions forward, it also has the

power to suppress individuality when done improperly. Normally, due to the lack of

understanding in proper ideation, my class tends to delve into group ideation from the get-go,

which is where the problem lies. The first step of ideation is always intrapersonal; with the self.

Brain-dumping in the term for an ideation session which takes place as an intrapersonal

dialogue. This dialogue first and foremost helps you understand and analyse what your

respective ideas are. With that understanding, one should then move to a group setting. This

example can be particularly observed in the case of Fig 4. And Fig. 5 above. Due to the lack of

students experiences and exposure with Urdu typography, they are inclined to rely on each other

for ideation and hence, implementation, which results in the works appearing similar and

confined to one direction. In the case of english typography, however, due to the abundance of

english typographic resources available everywhere, students have no difficulty ideating and

find it easier to come up with unique ideas to help shape their respective projects. To delve into

this matter of experience and learning, from the perspective of Urdu vs English Typography in

my classroom, I reached out to two of my students from 5th Semester VCD last weekend for an

interview, and am sharing some of their concerns below. When I asked them where they get

most of their typography inspiration from they stated the following things:

Duaa Kundi: **Pinterest** and Book covers.

Tahreem Nawaz: Usually when I used to do my typography assignment in the beginning I had a

habit of searching different platforms such as **Pinterest**.

The above statements offer an insight into their designing process, and further highlights, and

supports my hypothesis that most of our Typographic understanding comes from Western ideas,

hence creating a rift between English & Urdu; solely on the basis that *Urdu/Perso-Arabic*

typography is underrepresented on western design blogs, websites, etc. When asked about why

they felt this divide exists, they had the following to say:

Duaa Kundi: Yes, i do feel that there is a divide between the practise of the two, and the cause

of the divide in my opinion would be that people tend to lean more towards the **english**

language in general when it comes to design and typography, going as far as considering those

made with urdu of poor taste or even **kitsch**.

Tahreem Nawaz: Ever since childhood, we have been dealing and looking at **english type**,

consciously or subconsciously, but when it comes to Urdu typography I myself haven't had

much experience with it.

The above answers are extremely insightful to me as a Critical Constructivist Art Pedagogue. Hence, I would like to propose a solution to the above stated concerns that have been highlighted by myself and are mirrored by my students.

Positionality. Sustained Exposure. Increased Practice.

The first step I aim to take in order to lessen this rift is to understand my own **Positionality** on the subject matter. Personally, my interests have always lied Western Typographic standards, however, perhaps my bias puts subjects which I'm less inclined towards at a disadvantage. Therefore, I aim to be more neutral in my position when it comes to Typography and give Urdu Typography as much importance in my curriculum as I do to English Typography. The second part of the aforementioned Positionality I mentioned works at another level, simultaneously. Urdu as a language hasn't been well positioned in the mind of our students due to its lack of representation, and is subsequently considered a weaker language in typography, which puts Urdu at a disadvantage unfairly. Therefore, the positionality of Urdu must be improved through what I call **Sustained Exposure.** My curriculum at hand doesn't factor in Perso-Arabic typographers as inspiration, hence, I must factor in that when designing my curriculum, in order to expose my students to more Eastern Scripts. Considering Social Constructivist principles, students are better equipped to work with things that are already in their understanding, hence sustained exposure to Perso-Arabic type might increase their mental repository and help them Urdu as a language already isn't as well represented as it should be in our state, hence, if its

practice within the design studio was increased, it might be able to reach an even bigger audience outside of it.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, none of our Private Art Institutions find it problematic that while they are homes to other forms of 'culture', they are seriously neglecting one of the biggest components of culture which is (according to me) *local languages and literature.* All that I have aimed to identify through my essay is merely a fraction of the larger problem we have at our hand, one where we're actively rejecting our own artifacts, such as language. However, if my design studio class can do even a bit to counteract this, then I believe that I must make the changes needed.

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