

1

Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents by Lisa Gitelman

Gitelman, L. (2014). Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents. Durham: Duke University Press, pp.1-20.

“Documents are integral to the ways people think as well as to the social order that they inhabit. Knowing- showing, in short, can never be disentangled from power—or, more properly, control... In the modern era documents have cultural weight mostly according to their institutional frames—the university for example...”

This reading helped me to look at the “document” as a specific object in itself and apply its functionality to my own enquiry. Documents, as described in the quote above - and Urdu qaidas in particular - are reflective of the institutional frameworks in which they exist. Urdu, while not a “Muslim” language, is often taught in conjunction with religious education; thus, the document of a qaida presents an intersection of typography, pedagogy and social identity, within an educational system. The reading also encouraged me to think about ways in which a document is “used”. This process or ways of using also contribute to the shaping of a specific linguistic and cultural identity (for example, the qaida through acts of repetition, tracing and memorization).

2

Exercises in style by Raymond Queneau

Queneau, R. and Wright, B. (2012). Exercises in style. Richmond: Alma Classics.

“...His purpose here, in the Exercises, is, I think a profound exploration into the possibilities of language. It is an experiment in the philosophy of language. He pushes language around in a multiplicity of directions to see what will happen...”

This reference helped me think of language as something flexible and fluid - often constructed through repetition and context rather than as a fixed system. In Exercises in Style, the repetition of a single narrative through different structures demonstrates how meaning can be shifted by experimenting with form and style. I attempted to perform a similar exercise with the Urdu letter meem (m) by using the letter to explore various typographic and phonetic forms. By focusing on a specific letter across different forms, combinations and layouts, I wanted to treat language as a visual structure - which, in this case, also very specifically shapes and is shaped by a social and cultural context.

3**The Medium is the Message by Marshall McLuhan**

McLuhan, M., Fiore, Q. & Agel, J. (1967) *The Medium Is the Message*. New York: Bantam Books

“Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication. The alphabet, for instance, is a technology that is absorbed by the very young child in a completely unconscious manner, by osmosis so to speak: Words and the meaning of words predispose the child to think and act automatically in certain ways.”

In *The Medium is the Message*, McLuhan argues that it is not the content of the medium that matters but the characteristics of the medium that determine its content. Any media not only extends our capabilities but changes how we think and interact with each other - for example, the alphabet, which conditions thought and socialization.

This became relevant in my analysis of Urdu qaidas (primer books), which not only function as tools of language learning but as a media through which social and cultural identity is formed; through a specific visual and material structure, Qaidas instil ideas on language, religion and morality. My enquiry also eventually expanded to Urdu magazines read by my grandmother - these also operate similarly in shaping literacy and cultural identity. Both are thus distinct forms of media that negotiate how Urdu in India is learned, practiced and inhabited.

4

Preserving the Tender Things by Ayesha M Siddiqi

Siddiqi, A.M. (2022). Preserving the Tender Things. In: J. Tiang and K. Bhanot, eds., Violent Phenomena: 21 Essays on Translation. Inpress Books - Ipsuk, pp.83-102.

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Some people say translation is | a bit like a conversation |
| A mirroring | gnirorrim A |
| A dia | logue |
| But who is in charge here? | Who's doing the translation, and for whom? |

My initial enquiry for this project began with the idea of translation and my knowledge (or lack thereof) of languages I grew up with and those considered to be my “mother tongue”. As someone raised in a Muslim household - this meant, for a few sporadic years of my life, Arabic and Urdu lessons primarily learned through Quranic and religious study; however, these lessons were irregular and ceased completely by the time I turned twelve.

And while spoken Urdu remains a part of my life, both languages now feel distant and inaccessible. Siddiqi’s essay, specifically in its critical examination of the act of translation, helped me to think of translation as a political act shaped by distance and interpretation. This became relevant to my enquiry into Urdu typography and pedagogy: what does it mean to translate, reconstruct or analyse a language that is both familiar and foreign?

5

Monolingualism of the Other or, The Prosthesis of Origin by Jacques Derrida

Derrida, J. (1998) Monolingualism of the Other: or, The Prosthesis of Origin. Translated by P. Mensah. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. pp 1-18

“I only have one language; it is not mine.”

Derrida’s Monolingualism of the Other was relevant to my enquiry into Urdu and linguistic identity in India. In this reference, Derrida challenges the notion of language as inherited and questions concepts such as “mother tongue”; he argues that language is continuously shaped by history, power and social structures. These ideas can be applied to my explorations in relation to generational learning, cultural belonging and the unstable position of Urdu itself in contemporary India.

Derrida’s text also introduces a contraction to not only a few of my other references but my project itself. By using the structure of a dictionary - a format traditionally associated with authority and fixed meanings - my project presents language as being stable and contained. This contrasts with Derrida’s understanding of language as fluid, evolving, and ultimately, difficult to possess.

6

Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza
by Gloria Anzaldua

Anzaldúa, Gloria. "How to Tame a Wild Tongue." *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, by Gloria Anzaldúa, Aunt Lute Books, 1999. pp 53-64.

"But for a language to remain alive it must be used...So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity-I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself."

Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands/ La Frontera* was a key starting point for the development of my enquiry and project and in the referenced chapter particularly, Anzaldua describes language as not only a tool of communication but as being strongly tied to selfhood, belonging and power.

Anzaldua's writing and this reference was particularly relevant when considering the declining familiarity with the Urdu script across generations, despite a continued spoken usage across the country. My project therefore began with an investigation of how language can be learned, inherited and sustained (or lost) through acts of reading and writing, particularly through materials such as qaidas and magazines.

7

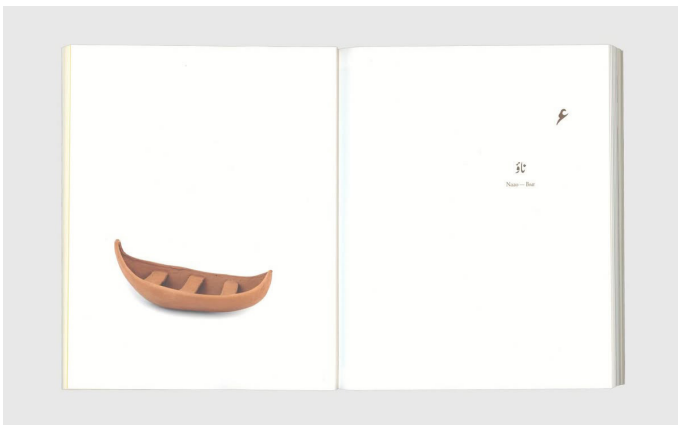
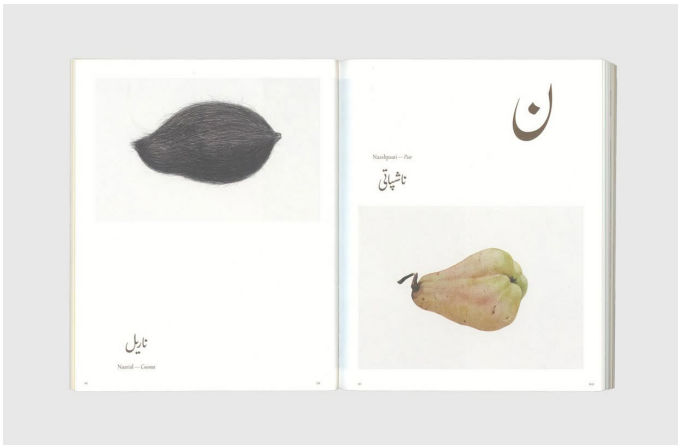
Polyphony of Urdu in Post-colonial North India
by Rizwan Ahmad

Ahmad, R. (2014). *Polyphony of Urdu in Post-colonial North India*. *Modern Asian Studies*, [online] 49(3), pp.678-710. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749x13000425>.

"...symbolic meanings of languages are not fixed: they are in a state of flux—continually constituting and reconstituting themselves...the reconstitution of symbolic meanings can take place fairly quickly if powerful social and political forces are present...the meanings of languages are organically linked to the sociolinguistic conditions of their speakers and evolve in conjunction with them."

Ahmad's essay helped me to understand more critically and clearly the politicisation of Urdu in India and the social processes that have assigned various, often harmful, symbolic meanings to the language. Ahmad traces this evolution across three generations and demonstrates the ways in which language ideology shifted following Indian independence and the Partition in 1947; interestingly, I can apply his findings to my own family – particularly in the differences between my perception and knowledge of Urdu compared to that of my parents or grandparents.

I believe this reference helps situate my personal experiences with Urdu within a larger socio-political context by highlighting the historical and social factors that have shaped the ways in which the language has been taught, understood and culturally positioned.

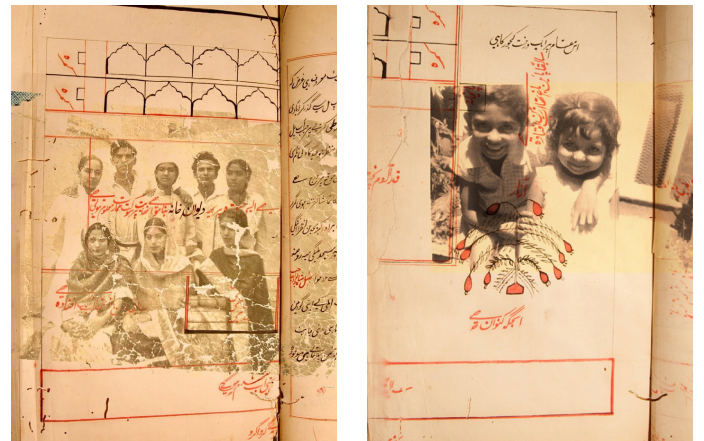


8
Alphabet Book // Urdu Qaida by Ali Kazim

Ali Kazim, A., Nasar, H. and Kamran, A. (2026).
Alphabet Book/ Urdu Qaida. Ochre Books.

Ali Kazim’s Alphabet Book was particularly relevant to my project as it re-imagines the qaida (or Urdu alphabet) as a beautiful visual journey, acting as celebration of culture and linguistic identity. This directly influenced my own exploration of the Urdu letter meem, as well as the systems through which language and identity are constructed.

Visually, this project explores how the aesthetics of qaida can be re-contextualized through a contemporary approach, while still retaining similar elements of instruction and nostalgia. Similar to my own approach, the book uses the format of qaidas to explore the intersection of Urdu typography and pedagogy.

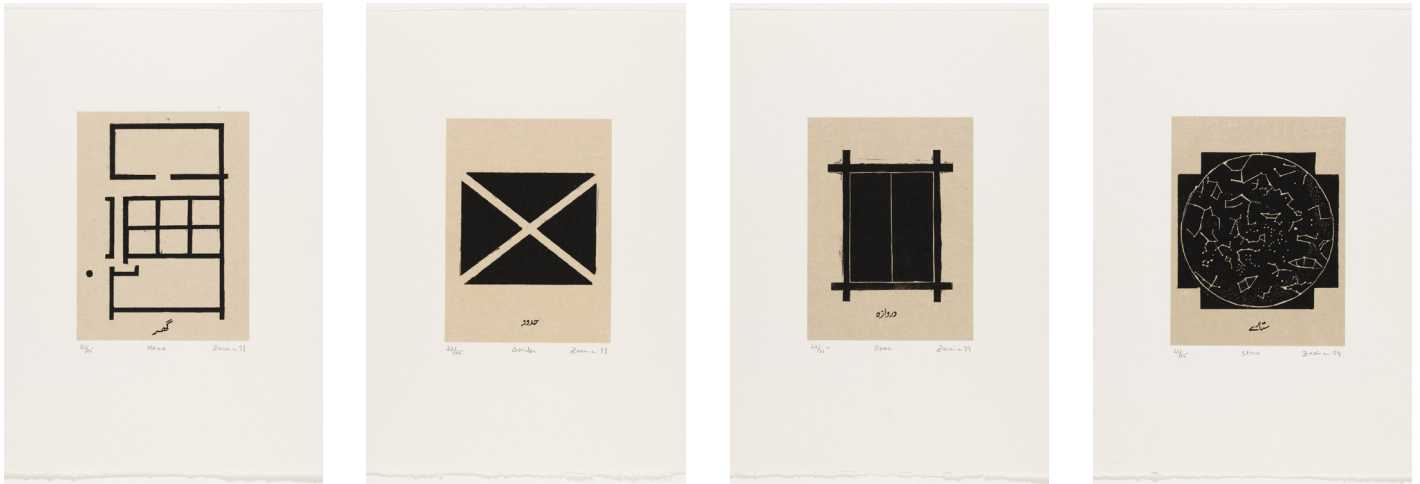


Top: *Burnt Book 2*
Below: *Bahisht-E- Aziz (Nobody Ceases to Exist When They Die)*

9
Saba Hasan

A Delhi-based artist, Saba Hasan uses multimedia practice to explore themes of language, memory and personal history. Across her work, Urdu is used as both a calligraphic element as well as a cultural symbol; her work addresses questions of identity, inheritance and belonging- which became increasingly relevant to my enquiry.

Initially, I explored Hasan’s material interventions with books and print - i.e. methods of tying, cutting, burning etc. These were deliberately enacted to challenge ideas of authority and knowledge (or it’s absence) and influenced my own exploration of qaidas, grammar books and dictionaries. In the third week, her engagement with family archives also became relevant to my interest in personal history and the generational differences in the learning of a language.



“All the words I have chosen are triggers for memory. My memory is intertwined with the word.... I do realize that the home I’m talking about has become a foreign place to me, but I revisit it with the help of language.”

10

Home is a Foreign Place by Zarina

Zarina (1999). Home Is a Foreign Place. [Woodcut]

Available at: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/132514>.

Zarina’s Home is a Foreign Place was especially relevant to my enquiry into language, identity and cultural familiarity with Urdu. In this series, Zarina uses woodcut prints paired with single Urdu words, exploring how language functions both as memory, place and distance - this format is also similar to the pedagogical structure of the qaida. The project not only uses Urdu words but reflects a visual and emotional identity that is indicative of Zarina’s own cultural identity and positionality.

Similar to this approach, my enquiry is also shaped by engaging with a language that is both intimate and partially inaccessible. This work also informed my understanding of typography as a carrier or personal and collective history.



11

Franco Dictionary by Rizomasr

Diab, A and Zein, Z “The Franco Dictionary.” Rizomasr, 2026, rizomasr.com/products/the-franco-dictionary.

Franco-Arabic is an informal chat alphabet that uses the Latin alphabet (English) mixed with numbers to represent Arabic phonetics and letters that don't exist in English. Functioning both as a guide to the language and commentary on internet culture, the project examines how digital communication can reshape and influence linguistic and cultural identity.

This reference was particularly influential in my initial explorations and provided a visual and structural framework I could apply to my own project. I began my enquiry by prototyping a project that could function simultaneously as an educational tool (dictionary), and a reflection on personal and political histories embedded within Urdu.

12

Lesbian Slang in Chinese by Siting Yao

Yao, Siting . Lesbian Slang in Chinese. 2024, cicadayao.cargo.site/lesbian-slang-in-chinese.

Lesbian Slang in Chinese is a bilingual riso-printed dictionary that explores the relationship between language, identity and communities through queer vocabularies. Similar to the Franco Dictionary, the project became relevant to my enquiry through its use of a dictionary format as both an educational tool and cultural object.

By combining anecdotes, photographs, illustrations etc - Yao creates a comprehensive publication that is reflective of how identity is shaped through language and lived experiences. This informed my own explorations of Urdu through a bilingual dictionary structure, while also pushing to incorporate personal narratives and family histories as a way of furthering my understanding of the language.

1

Polyphony of Urdu in Post-Colonial North India by Rizwan Ahmad

Ahmad, R. (2014). Polyphony of Urdu in Post-colonial North India. *Modern Asian Studies*, [online] 49(3), pp.678-710. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0026749x13000425>.

Across scholarly writings, political discourse, and public conversations, Urdu in North India is often believed to symbolise a Muslim identity and culture. However, in the essay, *The Polyphony of Urdu in Post-colonial North India* challenges this notion and instead traces the evolving symbolic meanings of Urdu in post-colonial North India. To do so, he begins by studying the language ideologies of Muslims and Hindus across three generations: those born pre-Partition, post-Partition, and in the early 1980s. He then conducted a cross-generational study which indicated that Muslim youth themselves no longer identify strongly with Urdu. This study involved examining specific Urdu sounds in speech and found that subjects were losing three of the five sounds studied. Ahmad and his team also looked at how the adoption of Devanagari¹ (and undoubtedly English) to write Urdu has influenced the language. Ahmad argues that these changes in the literary and spoken practices of North Indian Muslims are not only representative of shifts in the symbolic meanings of Urdu, but also reflect the socio-political changes the community has undergone in the 20th century.

Ahmad therefore establishes how Urdu - and language itself - exists as a polyphonic entity rather than one that is singular or fixed. He argues that language, as shaped by religion, region, script, and everyday use, is continuously socially and politically negotiated. To support this argument, the essay uses interviews, multilingual examples, transliterations, and observations, mixing academic analysis with lived experiences and everyday speech. These themes are evident in my work and enquiry, forming the basis for the beginning of my project. While my

project evolved over the weeks, the starting point was understanding my own relationship with Urdu, which, while perhaps my “mother tongue”, is no longer a language I am familiar with.

In my explorations, I reflected on my memories of learning the language, which led me to Urdu qaidas, i.e. primers or grammar books for children. In order to contextualise the essay within a visual exploration, I initially considered ways of translating its ideas into a qaida or dictionary format, such that the designed object could hold both cultural and educational meaning, similar to the qaida format itself. This was done by selecting specific words from the essay and re-framing them within a qaida structure. In the final week, I explored other methods of translation; aspects from the text such as intergenerational learning and unfamiliarity with script informed my approach of applying the methodology of the essay to my work. I adopted the ethnographic approach of the essay and interviewed my mother and maternal grandmother to understand the ways in which they learnt Urdu and the meanings the language holds for them. This became a process of both validating (or refuting) the essay’s claims while also developing a personal, familial, and archival narrative relevant to my project.

The essay itself helped challenge notions of language learning as neutral, while reinforcing how typography, script, and publishing are influenced by political and cultural structures. With these themes in mind, it became important to consider how design mediates access to language, literacy, and belonging.

¹ The script used to write Hindi

2

Zarina Hashmi

Zarina Hashmi, professionally known as Zarina was an Indian American artist and print-maker born in pre-Partition Aligarh, India. Across her work, which ranged from drawing to printmaking to sculpture, themes of home, memory and identity are often recurring. Zarina was also one of the first contemporary artists to use Urdu texts extensively within her work - this made her especially important to my research and enquiry. From a simple celebration of the language in *Urdu kay Aik So Aik Mahavray* (101 Urdu Proverbs) to the woodcut based “critical dictionary for home” in the form of *Home is a Foreign Place*, Zarina’s work repeatedly uses Urdu as an expression of memory and belonging.

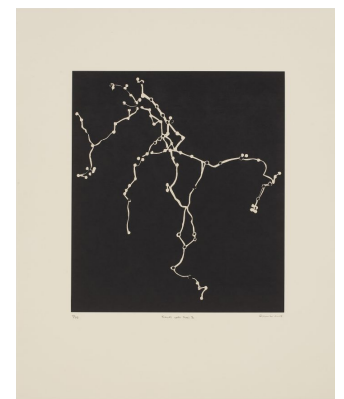
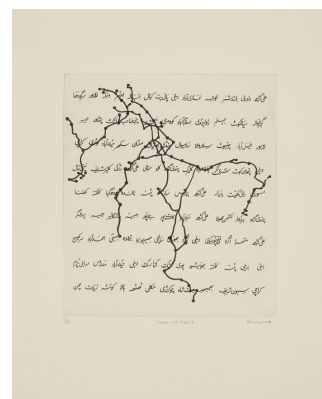
The works that are perhaps the most relevant to my enquiry are *Home is a Foreign Place* and *Travels with Rani*. The former is a series of thirty-six woodcuts that act as an “articulation” of Urdu world-making, with each print pairing an abstract form with a single Urdu word or phrase. In many ways, this project functions as a dictionary operating across multiple registers: containing simple words such as “door”, “sky” and “rain”, alongside words that reflect politics of belonging such as “border”, “language” and “nation”.

Rather than functioning merely as translations, these words carry emotional and cultural meaning shaped by memory and lived experiences. For example, *zabaan* is not just the word used for “language” but also means: tongue, to give one’s word or even identity and honour.

Similarly, *Travels with Rani* traces the South Asian cities visited by Zarina and her sister, accompanied by their names written in Urdu. Together, these projects form expressions of shared memory and personal history - themes that became especially important in my own work during the final stages of the project. The use of Urdu script itself within both these projects also reinforced the of language as a visual and material system rather than simply a means of communication.



Home is a Foreign Place



Travels with Rani

My explorations, while within the formats of qaidas and dictionaries, similarly attempted to examine Urdu and its relationship to (my) identity and belonging. The pairing of abstraction and text was also relevant to my experimentations with isolating individual words, sounds and fragments of script/speech as carriers of memory and cultural identity. Zarina's explorations with familial memory also encouraged me to consider my own family history and the evolving intergenerational relationships with Urdu; this led me to conversations and interviews with family members. Zarina's woodcut series, through its use of printmaking, represents a tactile and personal expression of linguistic identity - this also challenged my understanding of graphic design as limited to digital tools. Processes involving drawing or mark-making are aspects I would like to explore further in developing my project. Her work also expanded my understanding of the capacity of print practices to convey emotional experiences.

The themes Zarina explores throughout her work informed not only my understanding of the Urdu script as visual material, but also encouraged me to think about language learning as deeply connected to memory and identity, and loss. This gradually led me towards grounding my project within the format of a qaida or dictionary.

- Ahmad, Rizwan. "Polyphony of Urdu in Post-Colonial North India." *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 49, no. 3, 3 July 2014, pp. 678-710, www.jstor.org/stable/24495448, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0026749x13000425>.
- Ahmed, Zeerak. "Seeing a Class Divide through Typography – How Visual Representations of Urdu Have Shaped How Pakistan Thinks about Technology, Progress, and Innovation." *زاس ن س ت م*, 19 July 2018, www.matnsaz.net/blog/2018/7/seeing-a-class-divide-through-typography-how-visual-representations-of-urdu-have-shaped-how-pakistan-thinks-about-technology-progress-and-innovation.
- Ahuja, Sahil. "Dargah Shah-e-Mardan Complex, Delhi." *Blogspot.com*, 15 May 2026, pixels-memories.blogspot.com/2014/10/dargah-shah-e-mardan-complex-delhi.html. Accessed 15 May 2026.
- Ali Kazim, Ali, et al. *Alphabet Book/ Urdu Qaida*. Ochre Books, Mar. 2026.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. "How to Tame a Wild Tongue." *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, by Gloria Anzaldúa, Aunt Lute Books, 1999.
- Bennett, Harry. "The Brand Identity – Home of the Greatest in Brand & Design." *The-Brandidentity.com*, 13 Sept. 2023, the-brandidentity.com/project/the-worlds-writing-systems-oliver-h%C3%A4usles-book-showcases-26-scripts-from-all-across-the-globe. Accessed 22 Apr. 2026.
- "Biswin Sadi Jan 1989: Internet Archive." *Internet Archive*, 2020, archive.org/details/biswinsadijan1989. Burney, Sarah.
- "Zarina's Urdu World – Ishara Arts." *Ishara.org*, 2025, www.ishara.org/ishara-online/zarinas-urdu-world/. Accessed 26 Apr. 2026.
- Coles, Stephen. "From the Collection: The Art of Lettering Instruction, 1716–2016." *Letterform Archive*, 6 June 2019, letterformarchive.org/news/art-of-lettering-instruction/. Accessed 22 Apr. 2026.
- Dhuga, Amelia. "How Urdu Became a Language of Connection and Division." *GQ Middle East*, 13 Feb. 2026, www.gqmiddleeast.com/article/how-urdu-became-a-language-of-connection-and-division.
- Ghosh, Sutithi. "Zarina Hashmi: Explore Themes of Loss & Migration in Prints." *Teravarna*, 5 Dec. 2026, www.teravarna.in/post/zarina-hashmi-minimalist-meditations-on-home-exile.
- Gitelman, Lisa. *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2014, pp. 1-20.
- "Home Is a Foreign Place." *Metmuseum.org*, 2021, www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/499720.
- Hub, Learning. "Your Guide to the Urdu Alphabet for a Strong Start." *Language Learning with Preply Blog*, 6 Feb. 2025, preply.com/en/blog/urdu-alphabet/. Indian Diplomacy.
- "The Musalman - Preservation of a Dream." *YouTube*, 12 May 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LUmdx2YHGcA.
- Irfan, Anmol. "The Fight to Preserve the Urdu Script in the Digital World." *Time*, 27 Sept. 2023, time.com/6317817/urdu-nastaliq-digital/.
- Jenn Bratovich. "No Direction Home: The Life & Work of Zarina - Women's Studio Workshop." *Women's Studio Workshop*, 11 July 2014, wsworkshop.org/2014/07/zarina-gala-2014/.
- "Khilauna Feb 1973 Annual: Shama Group: Internet Archive." *Internet Archive*, Feb. 1973, archive.org/details/KhilaunaFeb1973Annual.
- "MEEM – the Urdu Alphabet." *Unc.edu*, 2022, urdualphabet.unc.edu/meem/. Accessed 21 Apr. 2026.
- Mitra, Smita. "Painting Urdu: How Language Becomes Art | Impart." *Impart*, 10 Apr. 2026, imp-art.org/perspectives/features/painting-urdu-how-language-becomes-art.
- Nasar, Hammad. "From Z to A: Zarina and Ali Kazim's Linguistic Co-Habitation" by Hammad Nasar – *Ishara Arts*. <https://www.ishara.org/>, Jan. 2026, www.ishara.org/ishara-online/from-z-to-a-zarina-and-ali-kazims-linguistic-co-habitation-by-hammad-nasar/.
- "Nobody Ceases to Exist When They Die - Saba Hasan | LensCulture." *LensCulture*, 2025, www.lensculture.com/projects/1979232-nobody-ceases-to-exist-when-t

Punch, The. "Abstract Art Helps Express What Words Can't Describe." <https://Thepunchmagazine.com/>, 2017, [thepunchmagazine.com/arts/art-design/amp-039-abstract-art-helps-express-what-words-can-amp-039-t-describe-amp-039](https://Thepunchmagazine.com/arts/art-design/amp-039-abstract-art-helps-express-what-words-can-amp-039-t-describe-amp-039).

Queneau, Raymond, and Barbara Wright. *Exercises in Style*. Richmond, Alma Classics, 2012

Rajendra Bhansali, Devika. *Typography and Education Letters and Strokes of Perso-Arabic Script Used for Urdu Language*. 2016.

"Saba Hasan." Platform-Mag.com, 2022, www.platform-mag.com/art/saba-hasan.html.

Sarkis, Kristyan. "Typotheque: The Influences of Greta Arabic Article on Typotheque by Kristyan Sarkis." Typotheque.com, 21 Mar. 2012, www.typotheque.com/articles/the-influences-of-greta-arabic. Accessed 21 Apr. 2026.

Siddiqi, Ayesha Manazir. "Preserving the Tender Things." *Violent Phenomena: 21 Essays on Translation*, edited by Jeremy Tiang and Kavita Bhanot, Inpress Books - Ipsuk, 2022, pp. 83-102.

"South Asian Design & Typography." Letterform Archive, 8 Jan. 2026, letterformarchive.org/south-asian-design-typography/. Accessed 22 Apr. 2026.

"The Franco Dictionary." Rizomasr, 2026, rizomasr.com/products/the-franco-dictionary. Accessed 19 May 2026.

"Typotheque: Tibetan Typeforms Book by Jo de Baerdemaeker From." Typotheque.com, 2026, www.typotheque.com/books/tibetan-typeforms. Accessed 22 Apr. 2026

Urfi, Jamil. "Blocked." Scroll, 4 May 2018, scroll.in/article/877761/biswin-sadi-how-i-came-of-age-in-the-1960s-with-long-gone-urdu-magazines-and-books-of-the-time.

Yao, Siting. *Lesbian Slang in Chinese*. 2024, cicadayao.cargo.site/lesbian-slang-in-chinese.

Zarina. *Home Is a Foreign Place*, 1999, www.moma.org/collection/works/132514.

"Zarina Hashmi (1937-2020) | Artist | New York." www.zarina.work/.