



Beauty, Form and Function in Typography

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Title: The Pessimist Type- beauty in the “letterish-ness” of the complex and the negative.

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Abstract: “Beauty in typography lies in the simplicity of a letter form”- this is the potentially problematic definition of beauty in typography commonly taught to students when it comes to exploring beauty in typography. This rule was probably taught because in earlier days, printing of letters was a difficult process and the removal of complex extensions and maintaining simplicity in letter forms just saved time. As a result, as a student one doesn’t experiment with complexity in typography. Readability and functionality is more concentrated upon. However, sometimes complex and hard to read typefaces serve the function better. For example: imagine the expressive and complex typography used in graffiti, album art and mystery movies being replaced by a simple, beautiful and readable font, say Helvetica. Odd, wouldn’t it be? Complex typography is beautiful because a simple and easy to read letter form is explored and played with and made to look “letter-ish” which intrigues the viewer.

Letters are visual forms first- be it simple or complex. Therefore, in order to achieve beauty in any typographic experiment, letters must first be treated as visual forms.

Sometimes, playing with the “letterish-ness” of a letter form can fetch us some great results. Sometimes, ugly and complex catches the eye faster than the simple and beautiful.

This paper discusses a student project called “The Pessimist Type”- an expressive typeface. It is an exploration in the “complexity” of Devanagari letter forms to experiment with beauty. This typography project is based on “pessimism” (the art of noticing the ugly instead of the beautiful, the negative instead of the positive things). The typeface has complex letters which are hard to understand in the first go, just like a pessimist’s personality. In order to read the letters in this typeface, one must understand the complexity of a pessimist’s personality and notice the “negative” spaces over the “positive” spaces. This exploration in the beauty and form of Devanagari letters increases the function of the simple Devanagari letters to complicated subjects such as album art, intriguing movie wall art, branding of mysterious theatre plays etc. It makes the simple, legible Devanagari letters complex, “letter-ish” intriguing and differently beautiful. This project brings to light the fact that the aspect of beauty in typography can be much more explored and experimented with, if readability, simplicity and functionality aren’t a constraint every time.

Key words: Beauty, Devanagari, letter design, form, complexity, letterish-ness, pessimism, intriguing, album art, theatre play art

1. Introduction

The belief that the beauty of typography lies in simplicity was probably imbibed in typography, and design because the purpose of letter forms was for functionality and convenience in printing. But in the present day, typography is also meant for art and design equally, which also requires dynamism and variation in letter forms. This is the reason why exploration of beauty in letter forms is necessary in typography. Other forms of art like illustration, photography, sculpture, drawing and painting went through a lot many experiments with respect to beauty. Various movements such as impressionism, cubism, futurism, expressionism took place where abstraction and stylization of forms was majorly experimented with which made them visually interesting. But in typography, since the readability and the functionality of the letter forms were always a constraint, such experiments with letter forms to explore beauty were very rare. Especially in Devanagari letter forms, because of the complexity in the structure of the letters, simplicity and

minimalism is followed most of the times to maintain the functionality of letter forms and make them legible. Experiments with respect to beauty in Devanagari letter forms were almost unaffected by the influence of all the previous movements of art. However, every form is made of both positive and negative space. The term “negative” literally means “that which is not”. Thus, negative space is the free space which the eye discards. Going by the above discussed conventional definitions of beautiful typography, the experiments on letter forms in Devanagari typography to achieve beauty have always been in the positive space occupied by the form because experimenting with negative spaces risks the functionality of the letter form and can at times make the form look irregular. The negative spaces of Devanagari letter forms which can potentially make the letter form beautifully interesting are hardly ever experimented upon. As a result, not much is achieved when it comes to explorations in the beauty of letter forms in Devanagari typography if only the positive spaces of letter forms are experimented upon with the fear of making the forms irregular and ugly. However, when the negative spaces in Devanagari letter forms which are otherwise an odd blind spot to the eye are converted into forms they look intriguingly complex as they cannot be identified in the first go. This is where the beauty of the negative spaces of a letter form comes into play. The term “pessimism” means “not looking at the beautiful and pleasant” and “concentrating on the negative and ugly aspects instead”. As quoted by the famous writer Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The secret of ugliness consists not in irregularity, but in being uninteresting” (Heller. S, 1993). One is more visually attracted to forms which are interesting, intriguing, complex and thought-provoking instead of simple and static forms which can be ignored at times. Thus, beauty in typography also lies in the complexity and the “letterish-ness” of a letter form. The “letterish-ness” of forms in typography refers to the appearance of letter forms such that they seem like letters when viewed, but cannot be completely identified in the first attempt.

Following the same in my typography project discussed in this paper, the art of “pessimism” was studied and experimented upon to explore the beauty of “letterish-ness” in typography. The aim was to experiment with Devanagari letter forms to the fullest and make them beautifully intriguing to look at by following a pessimist’s perspective, that is, by concentrating on the negative, the irregular and the otherwise odd spaces which the viewer discards, in order to explore the beauty of Devanagari letter forms and use them to create intriguing art and design using Devanagari typography.

2. The Pessimist Type: Stages of the Process and Applications

2.1 Stage 1: Incorporating the art of “pessimism” in the typeface

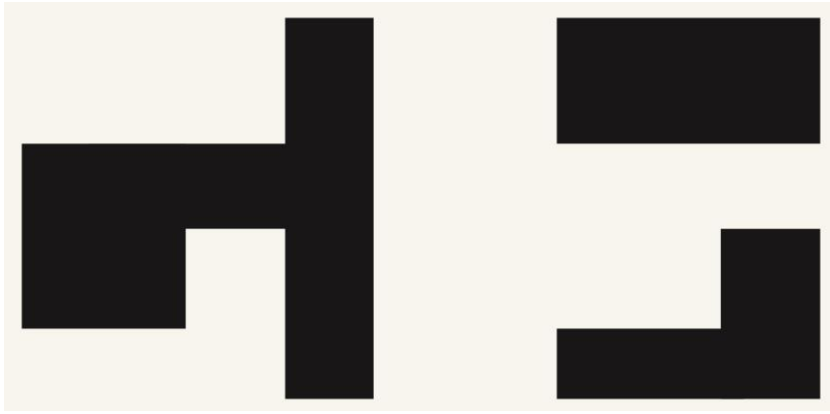


Figure.1: Rough sketch of Devanagari letter “na”- Comparison between the positive, legible letter form versus the letter-ish negative spaces of the letter form.

The art of “pessimism” means the art of looking at the negatives over positives and noticing the ugly and complex before the beautiful. A pessimist’s vision is full of negative blocks. The positives are always discarded. Applying the same insight into my project, the challenge of working with only the negative spaces around the letter form and discarding the positive letter forms was taken up. The main letter forms in Devanagari typography have a delicately complex structure. As a result, the negative spaces surrounding the letter forms look scattered and complicated when they are individually looked at. One cannot identify the resulting form as a letter form in the first go because they look “letter-ish” in the absence of the main letter form which constitutes the positive space. Therefore, the challenge of unifying negative spaces to constitute a single “letter-ish” letter form was taken up.

2.2 Stage 2: Exploring beauty in positive letter forms

The experiment of exploring beauty in typography by concentrating upon the negative spaces was turning out to be an interesting process. But however, in case of some letters where the structure of the Devanagari letter form was not very complex, the forms composed by simply using the negative spaces looked very static, like in case of the letter “na”, as shown in above Figure1. So in order to achieve beauty through complexity in the negative forms, the idea of first stylizing and complicating the main positive letter form was taken up. A reverse process was followed, the blind spots in my typeface were designed before the visible negative forms.

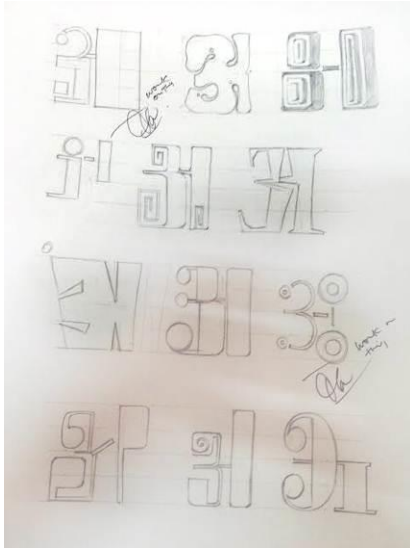


Figure.2: Rough sketch of the various positive letter form options tried for Devanagari letter “a”.

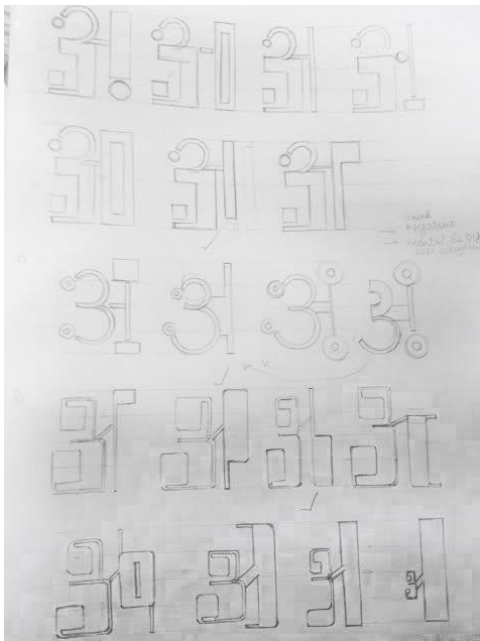


Figure.3: Rough sketch of the various positive letter form options tried for Devanagari letter “a”.

2.3 Stage 3: The Grid

After selecting a few options out of the rough sketches of various positive letter form options for a single letter, a basic grid for constructing the rest of the letters was made. The constructed basic grid consisted of basic measurements of x-height, ascenders, descenders and the mean line for all letters. The mean line was kept slightly higher than the usual height to achieve stylization in the letter forms. The grid had to be kept simple because the forms of the main letters were made to look complex and the forms

composed using the negative spaces around the main letter forms were potentially, even more complex.

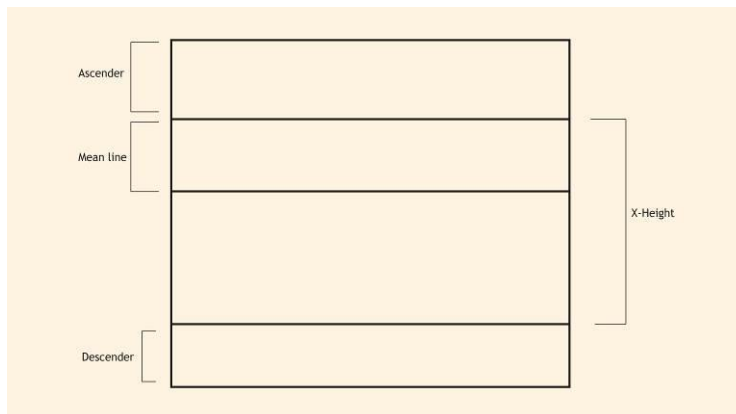


Figure.4 The basic grid used and followed for constructing the positive letter forms.

2.4 Stage 4: Converting the beauty of positive letter forms to negative

Two options out of the various options of stylized positive letter forms were selected and then converted to forms made of negative space. That is, the space occupied by the positive letter form was discarded and the negative space which now looked more “letter-ish” and intriguing than before was filled up and made to look dominating and heavy.

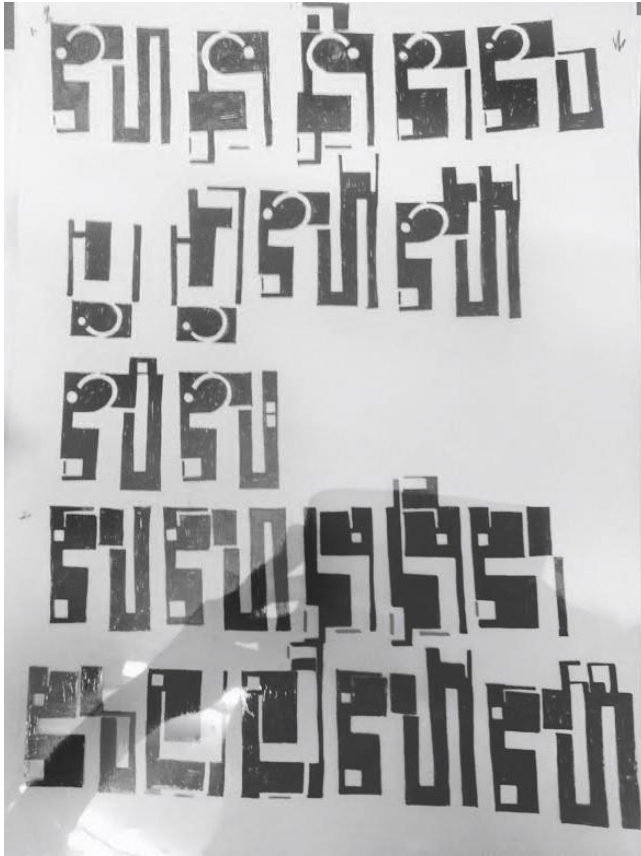


Figure.5: Rough sketch of Devanagari vowels rendered in the style of the letter-ish and complicated negative “block” forms of two selected options.

2.5 Stage 5: The Complete Typeface

After selecting the final set out of the two options, the entire typeface was then designed including vowels, consonants, half-letters (kanhas, matras, rafaars, velantis, anuswaars, ukaars, chandra-bindus, visargas etc), punctuation marks, numerals etc. as shown in the below figure.

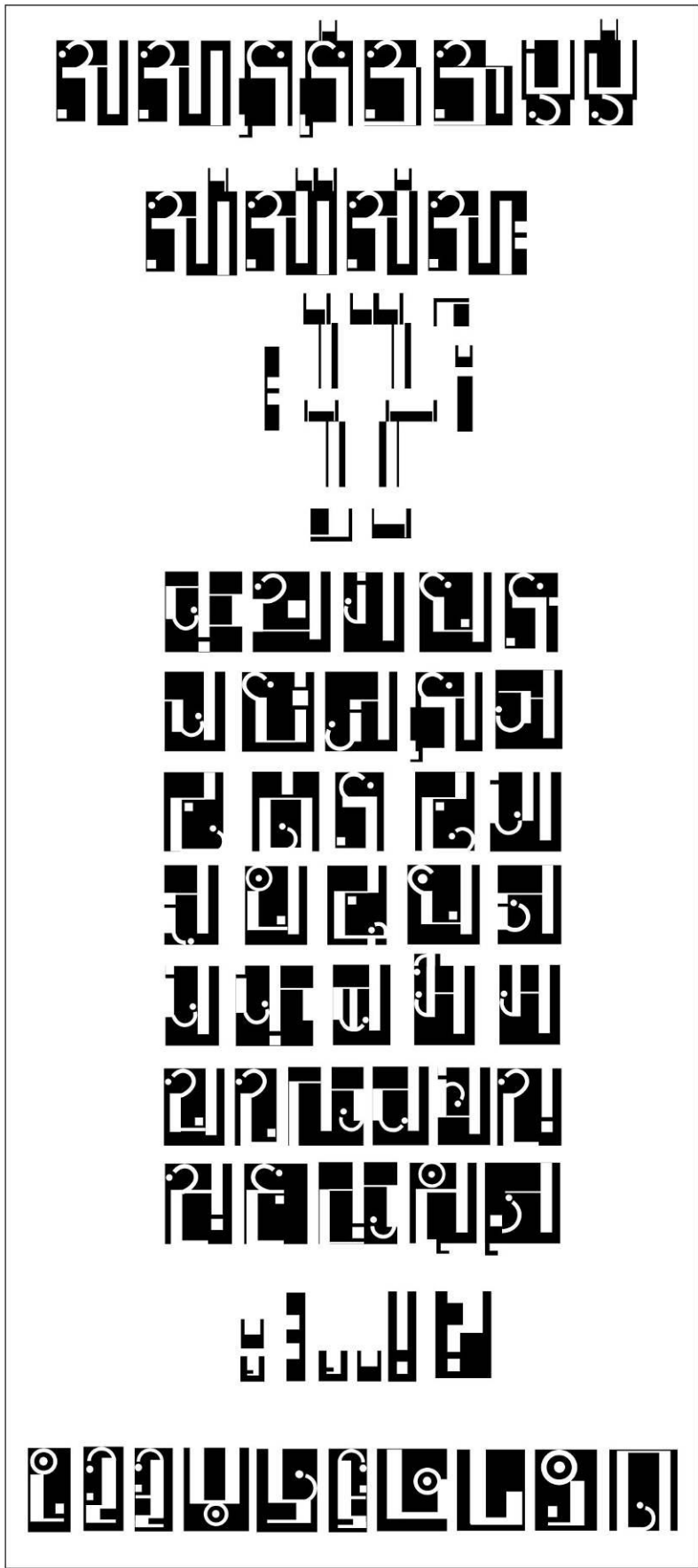


Figure.6: The final typeface including vowels, half letters, consonants, punctuations and numerals.

For the conjunct letters going by mechanical logic and combining two blocks of the forms created using negative spaces made the resulting letter form look static and blank. Hence, a single positive form composed by joining two letters was made, and the negative space around the positive form was treated as a single form. This slight change in the method of designing the conjunct letters in the typeface made a huge difference in order to enhance the beauty of the letter form.

As seen in Figure.7 below, designing the conjunct letters as shown in option (b) was preferred over option (a) because combining two separate letter forms as shown in option (a) made the resultant letter form look static and blank in comparison to option (b).

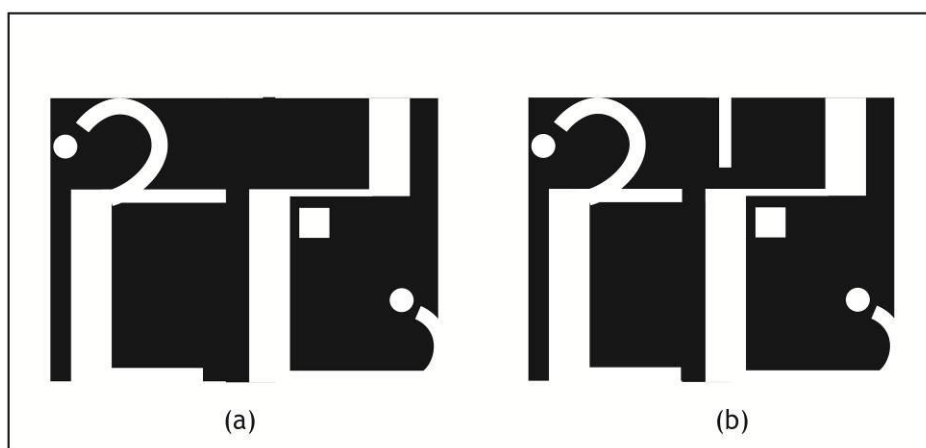


Figure.7: Comparison of two options of methods (a) and (b) used to design the conjunct letters.

2.6 Applications of “The Pessimist Type”

The first few applications of the designed display typeface were expressive applications and portrayed a pessimist’s point of view. Using the created letter forms, poster layouts and expressive versions of the day-to-day objects of a pessimist, namely, a diary, a desk calendar, and desk signs were created as applications of the typeface.

At first, typographic poster layouts of sentences which expressed the essence of a pessimist’s complex personality were created. Each layout composed using the letter forms was experimental, intriguing and expressive.

These layouts were also compiled into the “Pessimist’s diary” made of transparent glass sheets. The diary was created as an expression of a pessimist’s hard to handle and fragile personality which is why brittle glass sheets were used instead of using paper sheets. As the transparent pages of the book closed, the resultant cover page was combination of all the layouts superimposed upon each other to form a visually chaotic cover page of the diary.

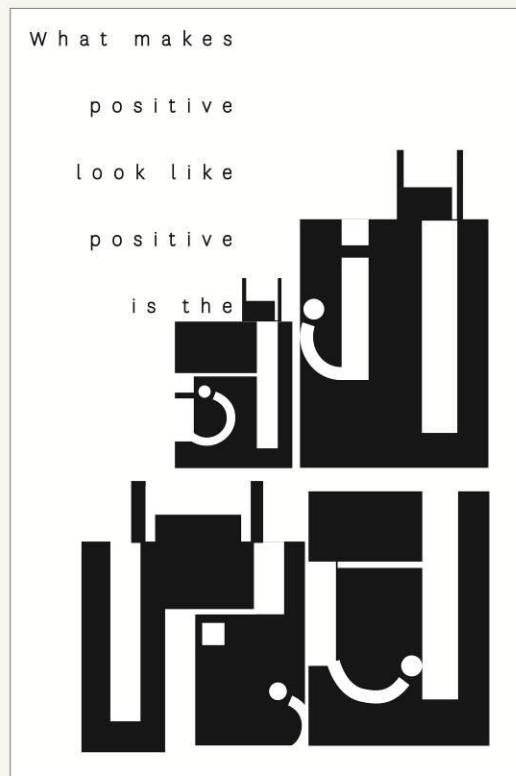
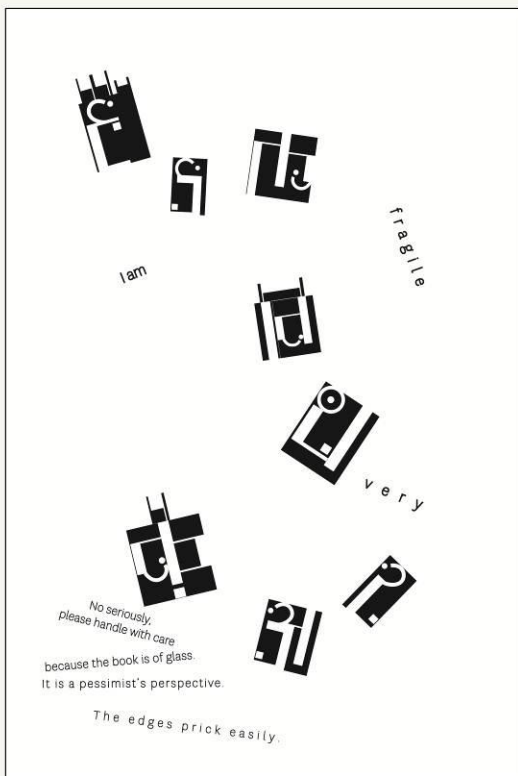
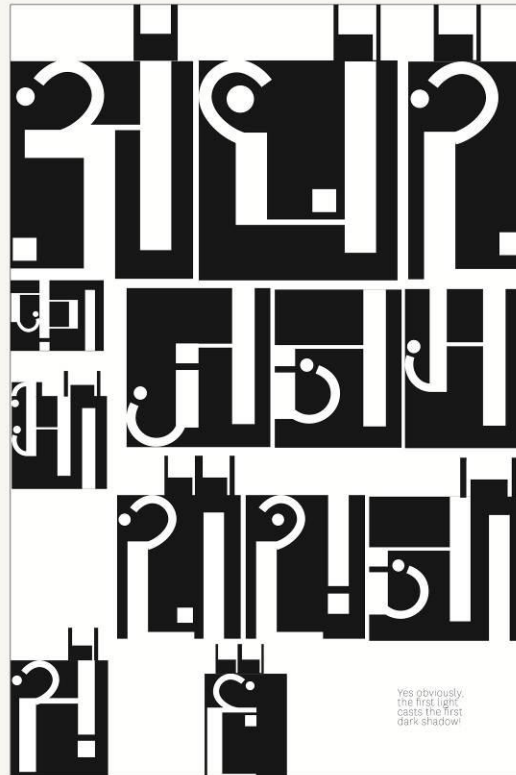


Figure.8: Individual layouts of pessimist sentences from the designed book.



Figure.9: Layouts of pessimist sentences from the designed book.

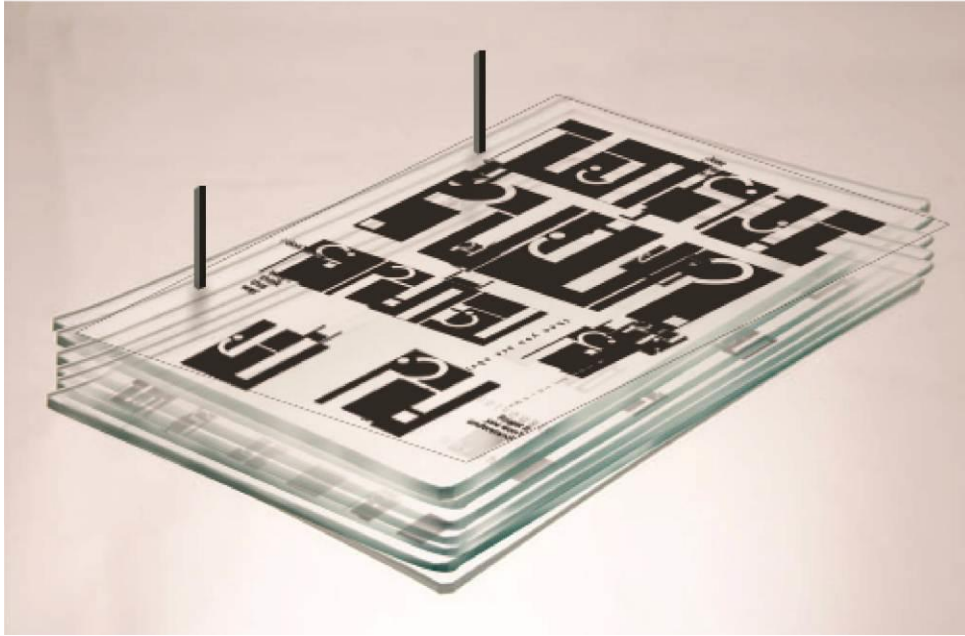


Figure.10: The designed book- “The Pessimist Personality” made of glass sheets, with the layouts compiled together.

The desk signs included compositions of a pessimist’s perspective towards his work desk, created using the designed letter forms. The table-top calendar was made in the form of a “Rubix” cube which is hard to sort, just the way a pessimist thinks his life is impossible to sort and complicated. The blocks could be rotated to change the date.



Figure.11: A pessimist’s work desk sign.



Figure.12: A pessimist's "hard to sort" table-top calendar.

Genres of art and design which are usually not much explored using Devanagari typography such as album art, movie wall art, posters etc were also chosen to explore the beauty of the created letter forms. Art for movies and albums which had negative, intriguing and mysterious themes was created using the typeface to experiment with expressive typography to the fullest.

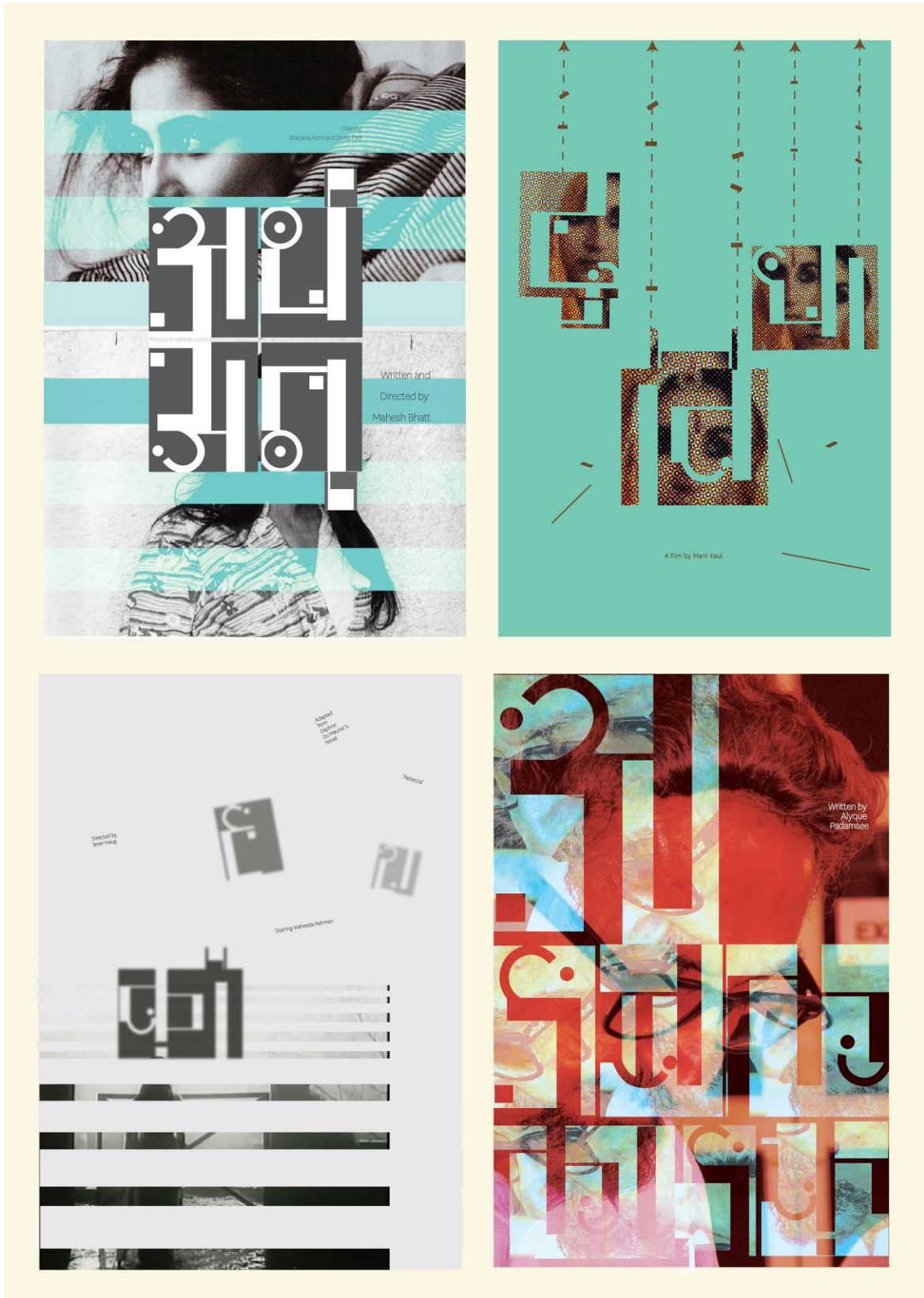


Figure.13: Movie wall art for Bollywood classics “Arth”, “Kohra” (left), “Duvidha” and “A Double Life” (right). Image sources of all the images used for collage in the art: Screenshots taken from the original movie discs.

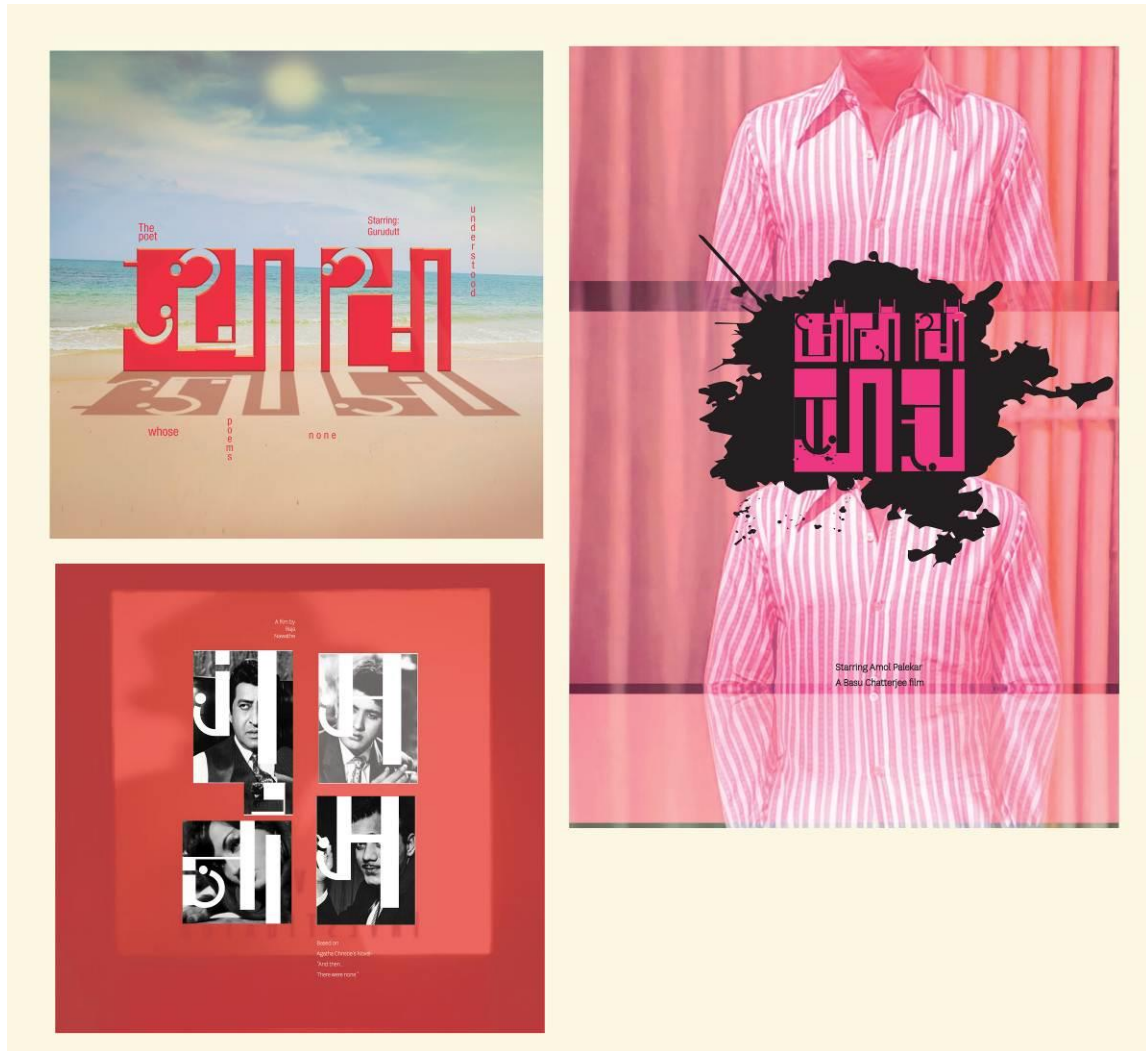


Figure.14: Album art for Bollywood classics “Pyasa”, “Gumnaam” (left) and “Chhoti Si Baat” (right). Image sources of all the images used for collage in the art: Screenshots taken from the original movie discs.

The intriguing negative letter forms of the typeface added a lot of expression to the compositions. The negative forms allowed tremendous scope to explore visual variety offered by the typeface. It offered scope to enhance the visual expression of the compositions by using different styles such as imagery, strokes, textures etc to be used in the negative forms.

Expressive art and design for Indian drama and theatre using Devanagari typography was another rarely explored zone. Devanagari typography was otherwise treated as a supporting element in design for Indian drama, that is, it was used wherever there was descriptive text and as informative typography on tickets, posters, etc. Devanagari letter forms were not treated as the main, dominating visual elements in Indian theatre. A visual connotation of the themes through images, illustrations etc was usually preferred. Taking advantage of this rarely explored zone, The Pessimist Type was applied here. Intriguing letter forms of The Pessimist Type added the quotient of visual expression through experimental typography and design to the chosen themes in theatre. To experiment with the complexity of the forms to the fullest, classic plays from Indian theatre which had deep and mysterious themes were chosen. The letter forms worked brilliantly with the themes of the plays when used as the dominating visual elements. The expressive typeface was used for branding and creating poster wall art, ticket designs, brochure designs, promotional media design etc for the plays.



Figure.15: Ticket design, brochure design, poster wall art, popcorn box design for “Naagmandal”- an iconic Indian play.

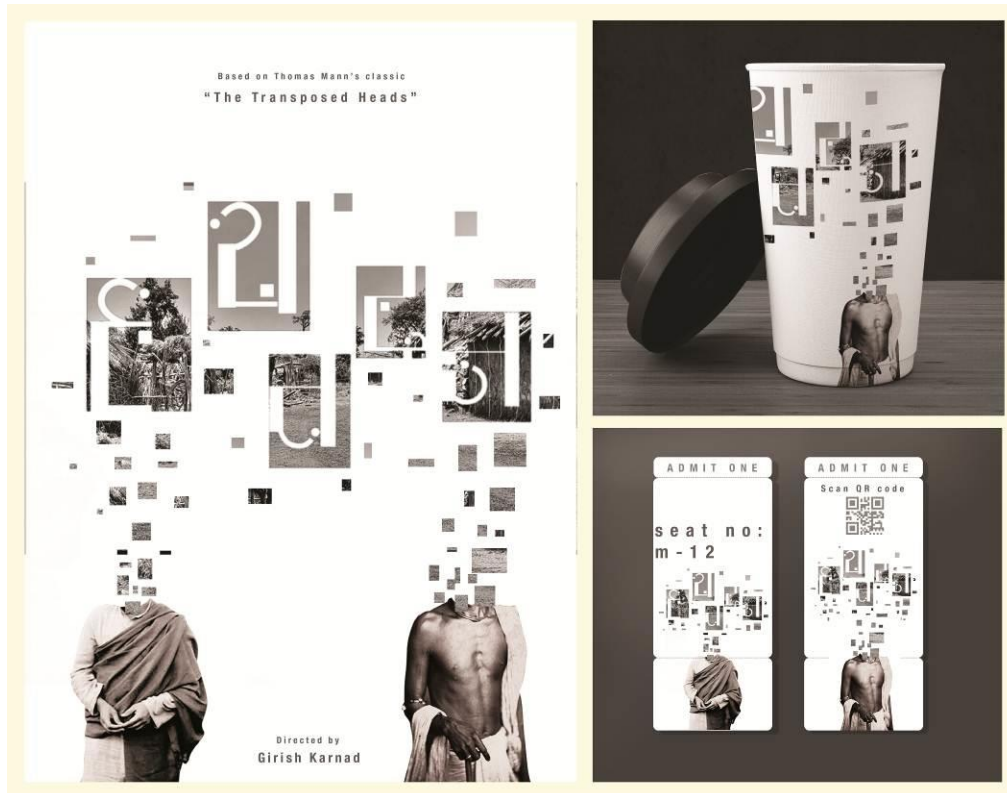


Figure.16: Poster wall art, coffee paper cup design, ticket design for “Hayavadan”- an iconic Indian play. Sources of all the images used as background and for collage in the art:

<https://vintagesareeblouse.files.wordpress.com/2016/01/s5.jpg>

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https://aminus3.s3.amazonaws.com/image/g0001/u00000006/i00003585/71ccf7ee0732080d157303897cdc9488_large.jpg

3. Conclusions

It is a wonder what the purpose of complicating letter forms, exploring them, making them hard to read, making them look “letter-ish” is when letter forms are primarily supposed to be functional and legible. But when it comes to exploring beauty in a letter form, rather than experimenting on the positive spaces and the simplicity of letter forms, exploring the combination of complex, negative spaces around the letter form is a refreshing change which further leads to visual variation and dynamism in the letter forms. When the unbalanced, negative spaces which are otherwise an odd blind spot to the eye when one looks at a letter form, are converted into forms the resulting forms look abstract and intriguing as they cannot be identified in the first go.

Usually, expressive typefaces are designed with a specific use and purpose in mind. One always keeps in mind the kind of look which the letter forms should convey, whether

grungy, informal, happy, etc. Functionality of the letter forms is considered first so that the designed letter forms serve the desired purpose better. But in case of The Pessimist Type, it was an expressive typeface which was initially designed with no specific purpose or use in mind. It was an experimental typeface with no preconceived ideas about the outcome (Bilak .P, 2005). The typeface was only created to explore beauty of Devanagari letter forms first by making them visually complex and intriguing. This helped free and experimental exploration of beauty in the letter forms. The rigid belief of not complicating the conventional structure of Devanagari letter forms because of readability constraints was broken. The conventional in typography is always universally beautiful but it may not always be interesting. Whereas, the unconventional in typography may not always be beautiful to all at first, but it definitely is thought-provoking and interesting to all. The unconventional too is beautiful sometimes because the conventional is what one is used to seeing all the time and can potentially get bored of and the unconventional is a welcome change which attracts the eye, even if it is odd and ugly to look at in the first go. Therefore, the definition of the word “beautiful” in typography can also be associated with letter forms which are unconventional and attract the eye faster than the simple and conventionally beautiful letter forms. The biggest objective which was achieved through this project was that it compelled the viewer to look at each letter as an unconventional, un-identifiable form first. Functionality of letter forms was, for a change, side-lined. The importance of letters as beautiful forms was conveyed as the letter forms attracted the eye despite being complex and hard to identify. This project helps us understand that sometimes making a letter form unconventionally beautiful by complicating it serves the purpose of typography in art and design better and fetches great results. All in all, the beauty in the “letterish-ness” of the complex and negative letter forms of The Pessimist Type brought to notice the power and scope of Devanagari letter forms to help achieve dynamism in typography, design and art.

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[Accessed 1st February 2018]

Sources of all the image elements used as background and in collage for movie wall art, album art: Screenshots taken from the original movie discs.

Sources of image elements used as background and for collage in the art for the iconic Indian play- “Hayvadan” in Figure 16:

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