

Lahore
Down 16.3.02

Oozing vulgarity

THE Lahore Police has been busy these past few weeks. Apparently, the government has decided that henceforth vulgarity is to be a criminal offence in this city. As an opening salvo, they have arrested several stage dancers and stand up comedians. With all due respect, I wonder if those in charge of this action have been smoking herbal jazz cigarettes. Have they considered just what it will take to remove vulgarity from this city? And has anyone considered how much of the city will be left after the vulgar element has been removed?

For starters, they will have to arrest half the residents of Defence and knock down their laughable Spanish Hacienda houses. The interior of nearly every army mess will have to be redone as will the Punjab Assembly and the city hall. Everything constructed in the Ayub era, including major national monuments, will have to go. We will have to uproot all those palm trees on the Main Boulevard, and (let's admit it) the Shish Mahal in the fort will also have to be knocked down. Architecture and landscape are just the tip of the iceberg; most bridal dresses and jewellery will have to be banned, as will embroidered kurtas for men. All boys and quite a few girls between the ages of 13 and 24 will have to be locked up along with their music collections. Benazir Bhutto will have to buy a new wardrobe and as for the Sharifs, well, if they ever set foot in this city again, they'll get life imprisonment. The list goes on and on.

The literate English-medium classes will not be much better off if Lahore book shops are any indication of their taste. Ninety percent of the titles on sale have one of the following four words on the cover page: Sidney, Boon, Sheldon and Mills. These books are basically of two types. The first is the 'Bonk Buster,' a salacious mix of sex and violence. I have no objections to this type; it usually has an exciting story and is really the only type of book that can be read while travelling. The second type is what I call emotional pornography.

Although it is neither sexually explicit nor violent, if features excessive use of words such as heaving, throbbing, turmoil, gasping, manhood and swoon.

Furthermore, the authors of these books use these words in a manner calculated to induce the maximum possible intellectual damage. Even worse, like all pornography, these books are both addictive and demeaning. I object in principle to censorship, but I do think a case can be made for banning these books for fraud. I believe that all the different titles are actually a single book with the name of principal character being changed.

Ridding this city of vulgarity will thus be an endless task. The reason is that we Lahoris are a fairly earthy and indeed somewhat vulgar people. As far as the action against the theatre performers goes, it reminds me of an anecdote regarding Randolph Churchill, the famously obnoxious son of Winston Churchill. Randolph had an operation during which the doctors removed a part of his lung. They later announced that the portion of the lung which they removed was 'not malignant.' To which a wit remarked 'This is a typical triumph of modern science — to have found the only portion of Randolph which is not malignant and removed it!' If the government wants to do something about vulgarity on stage, they had best start with arresting the theatre audiences instead of the performers whose only crime, as far as I can see, is to show us who we are.

In fact, if the government gets really serious, I might be in trouble myself. Although I am not a true vulgarian, I have carefully cultivated a taste for off colour jokes and bawdy poetry. This was done on doctor's orders. It seems that people who don't enjoy racy humour tend to get kidney stones in old age. I am also not above an occasional cheap shot, which I present as a final note: It seems the government is planning to install wind driven electricity generators on the coast down south. I think all of Lahore will rejoice at the idea of the hot air generated by Karachi finally being put to some use. So there. Arrest me. —YASSER HASHMI