

Granada

A Novel

Radwa Ashour

Translated from the Arabic by William Granara

With a Foreword by Maria Rosa Menocal



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Foreword

Ways of Remembering Granada

I n Arabic letters, the tradition of remembering the lost shards of Islamic Spain is an old and venerable one. The destruction of Cordoba itself—the Caliphate politically dismembered and the venerable city sacked, along with the nearby palatine city of Madinat al-Zahra, *One Thousand and One Nights*-like in its architectural wonders—was the subject of what is perhaps the best-known work of Andalusian literature, *Tauq al-Hamam* (The neck-ring of the dove), by Ibn Hazm of Cordoba. Not unlike the extended family of characters so lovingly created by Radwa Ashour in this novel, Ibn Hazm was himself of a generation that lived through the transition from one universe to another, a personal witness to the unimaginable losses that followed the political debacles of his time. The Cordoban's celebrated work about love, and about its ways of shaping the human condition, and about the sorrows of loss in love, easily elides the love of a woman with that of his homeland. When he says "My love for her blotted out all that went before, and made anathema to me all that came after" he might as easily be describing one as the other. And it is precisely this kind of crucial interdependence of public and personal histories, and the ways in which life and love must indeed go on, and yet are unbearably transfigured by earth-shaking historical events, that is on vivid display in *Granada*.

A work of historical fiction set in the aftermath of the Castilian takeover of the lone Islamic kingdom of Granada in 1492, *Granada* tells the story of an extended family grappling with the conse-

quences of that political catastrophe for the Muslim community. Granada at that moment recreated here by the Egyptian novelist Radwa Ashour, the turn of the sixteenth century in a Spain where the New World has just barely been discovered, is removed by about five hundred years from Ibn Hazm's devastated Cordoba—almost exactly as long and far as it is removed from us, and from the “interesting times” in which we ourselves live. One is tempted to argue that while the details of history change—and the textures and colors of everyday life are more or less exotic to a reader—the personal remains the same, and that the love stories and the family sagas that come to us superimposed on the narrative of the sack of Madinat al-Zahra by fundamentalist Berbers in 1009 are, at the end of the day, love stories and family sagas like all others, whether five or fifty or five hundred years later.

But in fact all history is not created equal, and the Arabs and many other Muslims have long harbored a complex nostalgia for an al-Andalus remembered, iconically, as both the best of times and the worst of times in their history. From Ibn Hazm through Radwa Ashour—with everyone from Ibn al-Khatib to Salman Rushdie in between—to evoke any given chapter within the longue duree of Andalusian history, no matter how seemingly domestic or how formally poetic, is to call forth the complex specter of how much a culture can achieve, how fragile such achievement is, and most of all, how much it can lose. Ashour has chosen 1492, the most easily lamentable moment in this history, and by far the most often chosen as a setting for historical novels¹—it is, after all, one of those moments

1. In relatively recent years one notes two prominent and best-selling 1492 novels: Tariq Ali's *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree*, with a setting just outside the city of Granada but at the same moment Ashour has chosen, and Noah Gordon's *The Last Jew*, whose eponymous hero is, instead, from Toledo, but who shares with the Muslim characters—as the Jews did indeed share historically, in Spain, with the Muslims—their struggles with the choices of adaptation and conversion versus resistance or exile. Far less common are historical novels set in earlier moments in the very rich landscape that is the seven-hundred-some year history that begins in the

of history whose various dramas, like those of the French Revolution, seem to have already been written by a melodramatic novelist. Nevertheless, in *Granada* she tells a story that is fresh in many ways, and whose relevance to contemporary issues does not obtrusively call attention to itself. In telling the story of an extended family on this cusp of history she leaves no doubt about the unmitigated evils that follow the revocation of rights at first granted to Muslims under Christian rule, without, however, leaving us with characters who are little more than mouthpieces for righteous ideology.

On the contrary, part of the genuine pathos of the novel—and I strongly believe the historical as well as personal verisimilitude—lies in the many different paths taken by the different members of the family, and in the equal love the novelist has for these very different children of her imagination. From those who became members of the violent resistance in the Alpujarras (that mountainous region to the southeast of Granada where Muslim refugees waged a ferocious struggle for dozens of years, until they were finally, brutally, repressed) to those who were not only willing to convert to Christianity, but even loath to give shelter, in the family house, to other family members suspected by the Inquisition authorities, all of her characters are first and foremost complex human beings and not easily judged. Driven by different ways of expressing their love for each other, for their culture, and for their children, these men and women (and the women have center stage a great deal of the time, as the enduring centers of a social world that is increasingly hidden and domestic, and this too she shares with Ibn Hazm, whose love-treatise is set inside the harem where he was brought up) struggle to make the best decisions they can, when no decision seems quite good enough, under the circumstances. So the matter of heroes and

middle of the eighth century, although two recent ones, both involving the more positive story of the legendary religious tolerance and cultural admixtures of caliphal Cordoba, are worth noting: *Journey to the End of the Millennium* by A. B. Yehoshua and, in French, *Le calendrier de Cordue*, by Yves Ouahnon.

villains is largely left open-ended and the only exception to this general human role is that of the handful of Castilian Christians who appear in the story, who are almost invariably the villainous and cartoonish heavies. But since this was in fact almost always officially and publicly the case, and since Ashour's few Christians here are mostly public and not domestic figures, it is hard to quibble with such a representation, although the extent to which ordinary Christians may not have shared the totalitarian program of the Church is as vital to the genuine pathos of the history as the conversions to Christianity by so many Muslims.²

But no matter: as with all genuine literature the ambiguities seep out everywhere, and a part of the bittersweetness of this novel certainly lies in the softly spoken understanding the reader has of how many of these Muslims, and how much of their culture, will indeed survive the crucible of this ghastly moment but transformed into something quite different from what they were in Granada before 1492. What makes the novel gripping and enjoyable is that as it progresses the characters are transformed by life in general—yes, of course by the crises provoked, by the earth-shaking events of the time, but no less—and sometimes far more—by the births of children and the deaths of fathers and mothers. And by the search for love. In 1991, Salman Rushdie published his own small but jewel-like contribution to this body of imaginative literature, determined to make us realize how close we all really are to 1492. In that story Rushdie sums up peaks through the mouth of Columbus to sum up these complex and often heart-breaking ties between our hearts and history, the history that often seems to set a stage for us we have not chosen and yet from which we cannot escape: “The search for

2. A forthcoming study, based on a detailed study of the extensive Inquisition archives by Yale historian Stuart Schwartz and entitled “Each in His Own Law: Salvation, Repression and Popular Toleration in the Luso-Hispanic World, 1492–1700,” will reveal the extent to which the harsh and devastatingly destructive intolerance of 15th and 16th century Spain was neither understood nor shared by many of the “Old Christians” of Spain.

money and patronage,’ Columbus says in Rushdie’s novel, “‘is not so different from the quest for love.’” And later: “‘The loss of money and patronage,’” Columbus says, “‘is as bitter as unrequited love.’”³

Ultimately, Ashour’s *Granada* is as touching a historical novel as it is not because she has got the history right and is able to interweave its interesting details into her narrative although she does just that, and readers will profit from and perhaps be amused by her judicious and accurate revelations about everything from the original terms of the capitulation of Granada (which granted religious and cultural freedoms to the Muslims, but were soon revoked) to the first items and people brought from the New World and paraded through the roadways of Andalusia. Rather, it works because it is written from the heart, and about the heart, and the novelist does not thus condescend to her characters, who are no more heroic nor less frail because of the historical stage on which they played out their lives. And we understand that there is much life to follow at the end, that because *Granada* was not about the stone city of its title but about a flesh-and-blood family who lived there, that history lies in the hands of their children: some born and others not yet, some who will be expelled in 1608 with the rest of the “Moriscos” and go to Arab and Ottoman lands (but always keep their iconic keys to homes in cities like Valencia); others who will remain in Spain, as first and second and third generation New Christians, intermarried, and ultimately seamlessly interwoven into Spanish culture; and yet others will emigrate to the New World, as one from the pivotal generation here already has, one of the young men whose coming of age from early adolescence through mature manhood provides the backbone of the narrative. The success of this novel’s marriage

3. “Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate Their Relationship, Santa Fé, January 1492,” was first published in the *New Yorker* of June 17, 1991. It was Rushdie’s first published work of fiction after the fatwa forced him into exile.

of the public and the personal is such that we finish the book convinced that the children of these characters will not only continue the family saga, but be the protagonists in the historical dramas yet to come, dramas that one generation after another, lead to us.

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