MOOR PLEASE

Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree, by Tariq Ali. (Chatto and Windus, 1992, $39.95), Reviewed by José Borghino.

S<hadows of the Pomegranate Tree> is Tariq Ali's second novel. His first, <em>Redemption</em>, (published in 1990) was a cheeky satire about the politico-sexual machinations of the far Left; it's pettifoggy, its inbred self-indulgence and its paranoid sectarianism.

The high water mark of Ali's notoriety came in the late 1960s. His work for Bertrand Russell's Peace Foundation and Michael Heseltine's <em>Town</em> magazine took him to the world's hotspots—Vietnam, Cambodia, Jordan, Bolivia, Berlin, Moscow—and brought him to the attention of the CIA. Back in Britain, he was targeted by the Special Branch, the Director of Public Prosecutions ordered an enquiry into his activities, and both Tory and Labour MPs clamoured for his deportation while John Lennon wrote <em>Power to the People</em> for him and his associates.

Ali has written over a dozen books and plays on world history and politics, including <em>Who's Afraid of Margaret Thatcher?, Trotsky for Beginners, Can Pakistan Survive?, The Nehrus and the Gandhis</em> and, in 1987, <em>Streetfighting Years</em>, a political autobiography of the decade between 1965 and 1975.

By any account, then, Ali has been a busy and productive man. He also has a gift for timing. <em>Redemption</em>, with its theme of the tragi-comic implosion of the Old Left, appeared as the superannuated regimes of eastern Europe collectively suicided. Then, in 1992, the Year of Ole, with anything Hispanic at the top of the hit parade for the marketers of History, Ali published a 'Spanish' novel.

Set in 1500, when Francisco Ximenes de Cisneros became the archbishop of Granada, <em>Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree</em> is more a family saga than a historical novel. It follows the declining fortunes of a Muslim family as they face the dilemma posed by the rabid fanaticism of Cisneros who, unlike his tolerant predecessor, gave Islamic Granadinos the 'choice' of death or conversion to Catholicism.

Ali's political purpose behind this novel is fairly obvious. At a time when Muslims can be blithely satanised by the West as barbaric, reactionary and repressive, Ali returns to a historical moment when the tables were turned. Islamic Granada was, in many senses, more sophisticated, liberal and tolerant than its Catholic neighbours. As the last bastion of Muslim rule in the Iberian peninsula, Ali also makes it an emblem for the 700 years of Islamic art, history and culture in Spain. When the Catholic monarchs marched in, and especially when they appointed Cisneros, this long tradition of social and religious tolerance was wiped out.

Ali opens the book with a scene guaranteed to make any late 20th century liberal wince. Cisneros orders the confiscation of all the manuscripts in the Moorish libraries of Granada and publicly puts them to the torch. The obvious echoes of Nazi bookburnings in the 1930s put the reader in no doubt that what follows will be a chronicle of religious persecution, ethnocide and genocide with very modern overtones—but this time done in the name of Jesus Christ and so-called western values. The repeated ravings by Cisneros and others about the need for racial purity reinforce the links between the actions of the 16th Century Spanish Church and State and the practices of modern fascism.

The choice for the Muslim family at the centre of this saga is between religion and motherland. Most of the protagonists are justifiably confused—waiting for some sort of compromise, or a sign, or perhaps the aid of the Sultan of Turkey, none of which comes. Some of them convert to Christianity—with varying degrees of bad faith. One, the desipated Great Uncle Meekal or Miguel, has become the Bishop of Cordova, although he admits in the course of the book that he still faces Mecca and prays to Allah on Fridays. Others, like the firebrand eldest son of the clan, Zubayr, take up arms against the infidel in a quixotic attempt to halt the destruction of their culture. Others flee to Morocco. But most are callously slaughtered in defence of their small, idyllic town at the climax of the book.

I can tell you this without spoiling the end of this novel because a bloody massacre is clearly inevitable from the start—even if you don't know a scrap of Spanish history. And this is one of the problems with the book: it deals with a dead-end culture—not the Moorish culture of post-conquest Granada in general but that of its ruling class. Ali has focused on the family that owns the small town of al-Huydal and its surrounding territory, and who, of course, have the most to lose from being dispossessed.

This helps him create some ethical tension because they would also have the most to gain from converting to Christianity. But, having set them up, as Ali does, as unquestionably honourable and honest folk, it is inconceivable that they should choose anything but an honourable and grisly end. Anything else would be like Luke Skywalker in <em>Star Wars</em> betraying Princess Laya and setting up a McDonald's franchise with Darth Vader on Pluto—no way José!

True, the villagers of al-Huydal, who include Jews and Christians, also choose to fight and die alongside their Muslim overlords, but by then they've been surrounded by cut-throat Christian soldiers anyway. It is also certainly true that Muslim Spain was considerably more tolerant of its subjugated Christian and Jewish populations than the Catholics turned out to be. My quibble is not with history but with this novelisation. It may serve Ali's purpose that the townsfolk are indiscriminately butchered regardless of creed because it underlines the polemic he's pushing about the blind fanaticism of 16th Century Spanish Catholics. As a novelistic device, however, it banishes any hope of the characters rising above the rhetoric and being any more than cardboard cutouts moved around to illustrate a thesis.
In the end, even the heroic resistance of the town against the blood-thirsty Christians reads annoyingly like a boys' own version of Islam's Last Stand. And, anyway, does anyone in the world, except perhaps the head of Opus Dei, believe that the Spanish Inquisition and the State that ran it, were anything but cruel, ignorant and corrupt? What little dramatic tension there is in Shadows of the Pomegranate

WORK THAT BODY


The debate around the 'naturalness' or social constructedness of the body and the self preoccupies many social theorists writing about eating disorders. Matra Robertson and Judith Rodin represent the two sides of the debate. Both work as therapists treating people with problems around food and their bodies. Both use their encounters with clients to illustrate and elaborate on their theoretical stances. However, that is where the similarity ends.

Body Traps is a do-it-yourself manual for dealing with bodily obsessions. The audience is placed in a 'patient role' as Rodin systematically outlines several 'body traps' including the vanity trap, the shame trap, the competition trap, food traps, dieting rituals traps, the fitness trap and the success trap. She identifies the origins of these various traps, offers quantitative scales for the audience to self-test their degree of entrapment and suggests escape routes.

The book is about bodies, yet it contains no theory of how bodies come to be seen in actuality. Neither the body nor the self are conceived of as socially constructed concepts. Rather, it is argued that the individual will only be free when she liberates the real (inner) self and develops a stable body image which is commensurate with her 'real' body. The title of the book itself implies that the body is a liability rather than enabling and that it takes massive amounts of 'selfwork' and 'bodywork' to allow the body to reflect the 'real' person within.

The key problems which Rodin identifies are women's lack of knowledge about their bodies and their 'malleable' body image. Her therapeutic prescription is to encourage women to correct false knowledge about themselves and their bodies and to embark on a crusade to 'liberate the real you'. Rodin directs scathing criticism towards tendencies within modern western societies towards surveillance and over-vigilance about the body, yet she entreats her audience to test, self-assess, monitor, check and scrutinise themselves to establish their degree of entrapment. The self is subjected to the scrutiny of the 'normal'. In the genre of popular women's magazines, Rodin supplies copious scales, tests and drawing exercises for self-diagnosis and then provides fix-it strategies for the reading audience to work on unleashing the self.

Although the key focus of Rodin's book is work on the self, she does recognise the need for a more structural approach to significant social change. She argues that 'breaking the body traps' involves 'changing yourself, changing other people, and changing society'. Her discussion of structural forces influencing and circumscribing women's choices has strong parallels with Naomi Wolf's arguments in The Beauty Myth. Yet Rodin moves beyond Wolf in proposing a conspiracy theory depicting society as an ogre which conspires via socialisation and other forces to keep women entrapped.

The assumption of ignorance on the part of women about their bodies and their selves puts Rodin herself in something of a 'knowledge trap'. She confuses cognitive and emotive aspects of body image—or, in other words, how women know and how they feel their body image. Research shows that more than 95% of women overestimate their body size. Rodin assumes this indicates inaccurate body knowledge. However, research conducted in Adelaide by Ben-Tovim and others and reported in The International Journal of Eating Disorders suggests there is a clear distinction between knowing that one is fat and 'feeling fat'. Overestimation on the basis of 'feeling fat' does not necessarily imply faulty knowledge.

Overall, Body Traps is undertheorised, overlong and uncritical about the effects of therapeutic intervention.

In a tight, concise and comprehensive yet occasionally playful book, Matra Robertson in Starving in the Silences uses therapeutic encounters to embellish a gripping narrative about women's silenced history. She identi-