

A “compelling ... guided tour through the underground youth culture in Tehran ... an illuminating book.” Michiko Kakutani, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*



Lipstick Jihad

A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in
America and American in Iran

AZADEH MOAVENI

Title: Lipstick Jihad
Author: Azadeh Moaveni
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About the Book

Azadeh Moaveni was born in Palo Alto, California, into the lap of an Iranian diaspora community longing for an Iran many thousands of miles away. As far back as she can remember she felt at odds with her tangled identity. College magnified the clash between Iran and America, and after graduating, she moved to Tehran as a journalist. Immediately, Azadeh's exile fantasies dissolved.

Azadeh finds a country that is culturally confused, politically deadlocked, and emotionally anguished. In order to unlock the fundamental mystery of Iran—how nothing perceptibly alters, but everything changes—Azadeh must delve deep into Tehran's edgy underground. *Lipstick Jihad* is a rare portrait of Tehran, populated by a cast of young people whose exuberance and despair bring the modern reality of Iran to vivid life. Azadeh also reveals her private struggle to build a life in a dark country—the struggle of a young woman of the diaspora, searching for a homeland that may not exist.

Discussion Questions

1. In the introduction to the book, the word jihad is translated as "struggle". Why do you think the title of the book is "Lipstick Jihad"? Do you like the title? Why or why not?
2. Most of Azadeh Moaveni's family arrived in America just before or with the 1979 revolution. They view themselves as exiles rather than immigrants [p. 28]. What effect does this sensibility have on their sense of identity and their need to assimilate?
3. At the beginning of the book, Azadeh is in many ways a typical teenager, trying desperately to fit in with her peers. She is embarrassed by her Iranianness, especially in the wake of the hostage crisis. She feels caught between two irreconcilable cultures—those of her Persian home and her American school. By college, however, she sheds her efforts to cultivate a certain "ethnic ambiguity" [p. 10] and instead embraces "the joys of my own private Iranianness" [p. 28]. How does her sense of her own identity change once she moves to Iran?
4. Upon arriving in Iran, Azadeh realizes that growing up on the "outside" came with many complications: "You grew up assuming everything about you was related to that place, but you never got to test that out . . . You spent a lot of time . . . feeling sad for your poor country. Most of that time, you were actually feeling sorry for yourself, but since your country was legitimately in serious trouble, you didn't realize it." [p. 32] To what extent do hyphenated Americans use questions about cultural origins as a cloak to conceal deeper uncertainties about themselves and their values?
5. Azadeh decides that in order to portray Iran's young generation faithfully, she needs to live among them and like them. "I cannot write about them without writing about myself," she writes [p. xi]. If an author becomes part of the story she is writing, does she lose her ability to report objectively? Where in the book does the tug between objective reporting and Azadeh's subjectivity as an Iranian woman reveal itself?

6. Azadeh describes the rebellion of Iranian youths as various "as if" behaviors [pp. xi, 55, 62]. What does she mean? Do these behaviors have "real" effects?
7. Throughout the book, Azadeh's perceptions about Iran and its future shift dramatically. In one moment, she calls Iranian society sick, "spiritually and psychologically wrecked," [p. 101] while at other times she discusses the revolution's accidental achievements, including the higher literacy for women and the growing secularism of the middle class. What does this see-sawing in tone between despair and hope reflect about Iran?
8. The Iranian diaspora in America is enamored with an Iran that is no more. As Siamak tells Azadeh: "If you are a nostalgic lover of Iran, you love your own remembrance of the past, how the passions in your own life are intertwined with Iran." [p. 45] How does this nostalgia and sense of personal grievance affect what Iranian-Americans teach Americans about their changing country?
9. In Chapter 3, Azadeh writes: "Made neurotic by the innate oppressiveness of restrictions, Iranians were preoccupied with sex in the manner of dieters constantly thinking about food." [p.71] How does the culture of the revolution affect relations between the sexes in Tehran? How does Azadeh respond to the gender gap she observes around her?
10. At a press conference for President Khatami at the U.N., Azadeh struggles over her decision to wear the veil. [pp. 169-172] Why is the decision so difficult?
11. In "Love in a Time of Struggle", Azadeh writes that romantic relationships between men and women "served a far more vital purpose: taking a fragile identity and anchoring it in a situation or person." In Iran, one has to find a partner who wants "the same sort of Islamic Republic experience." [p. 179] Whom does Azadeh look to to help anchor her identity? Do they share a vision of their Islamic Republic experience? Why or why not?
12. How do the twin stories of Mira and Fatima reveal the restrictions women face in Iranian society? Since the traditional Fatima lacks the opportunity to establish her independence and ultimately gives up her job for an arranged marriage, was she truly served by the education the revolution made possible for her? In the end, does consciousness of her rights enhance her life, tied as she is to her conservative family, or does it make its limitations more painful?
13. How does the beating that Azadeh receives during the riot of "the summer of the cockroach" affect the way she sees Iran? How does the ever-looming prospect of violence affect the populace of Iran in general?
14. What finally pushes Azadeh to leave Iran?
15. After Sept. 11, Reza tells Azadeh, "There's no outrage in the West when we die, no one talks about civilian deaths, because by now our loss of life is ordinary." [p. 224] Even though Iranians are described throughout the book as markedly pro-American, do the reactions Azadeh describes to Sept. 11 suggest a deeper ambivalence about America's intentions and presence in the Middle East?
16. Young people are described as changing Iran from below, when "at some historic moment impossible to pinpoint, around the turn of the millennium, Iranians' threshold for dissimulation and constriction sank, and people simply began acting differently." [pp. 61-62] At the same time, Azadeh chronicles young people's apathy at the failure of the reform movement. How important can young people be to Iran's future once apathy has set in? Can a society truly be changed through how people live daily life, from the bottom up?
17. *Lipstick Jihad* is about the search for home. At the end of the book, where is home for Azadeh Moaveni?

Critical Praise

A “compelling...guided tour through the underground youth culture in Tehran...an illuminating book.” —Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

“Moaveni has a journalist’s eye for...struggle and a memoirist’s knack for finding meaning in her own internal conflicts.”—*Washington Post Book World*

“Lipstick Jihad is as hip as the promise of its title, insightful, smart and often profoundly moving...Moaveni writes stunningly well.” —*Chicago Tribune*

“*Lipstick Jihad’s* tug between objective reporting and Moaveni’s subjectivity as an Iranian woman shines a fascinating light on a nation at odds with itself.”—*Entertainment Weekly*

Excerpt (with copyright information)

I ran back down the boulevard toward my car, ducking into side alleys, bending over every few feet to slide a loose sandal back on, cursing myself for having worn the flimsiest shoes I owned. When I finally reached the car, I slid behind the wheel, slammed the door, and wrapped tissue around my swollen, torn up feet. I scanned ahead to see where the vigilantes were coming from. They were descending out of the park in waves, a sea of bearded men mostly dressed in black, standing shoulder to shoulder, chanting the name of the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. They kicked in car doors, screaming all the while, calling the women whores and threatening to teargas the crowd — full of children — if it didn't disperse. At one point, I couldn't see out my windows, there were so many of them pressed up against my car, their faces contorted. I clicked the power-locks, and prayed.

I dragged my shocked, sweaty body back to the party I had left two hours before, to find my friends sprawled about watching *Friends*, the scent of hash heavy in the air. Someone get this girl a drink, one of them said. History rumbled around them, literally right outside the door, and they were more concerned with what Rachel said to Chandler. Iranian television had recently debuted a new sitcom, a sort of *Friends* in *Veils*, and they were arguing over how directly the plots had been lifted. I took my drink into the bathroom, filled the tub with water, and let my feet soak as I worked to understand why some of my friends were so indifferent to the changes in the regime's political structure. Years of failure and layers of stale rhetoric had emptied the Revolution of meaning. The war with Iraq and a decade of bombs and privation had turned them cynical, altogether detached from the doings of the system. To them, upgrading from one brand of mullah to another was not a compelling enough reason to forsake this inner domain, free of pretense and false slogans. Why stand up for the Revolution, as it lurched to find itself?

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Author Bio

Azadeh Moaveni grew up in San Jose and studied politics at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She won a Fulbright fellowship to Egypt, and studied Arabic at the American University in Cairo. For three years she worked across the Middle East as a reporter for *Time Magazine*, before joining the *Los Angeles Times* at the end of that year, to cover the Iraq war. She lives in Tehran.

Author Interview

Q: This is your first book. You were 24 years old when you embarked upon it. Did you hesitate to write a memoir at such a young age? What made you do it?

A: It felt very presumptuous to write a book before the age of thirty and call it a memoir, which carries all these connotations of conclusion and summing up. Iranian friends especially raised their eyebrows because the concept of an ordinary person's memoir, as opposed to that of a statesman or a historical figure, doesn't really exist in modern Persian nonfiction. I had to keep reminding myself that it was a personal account of a childhood and a journey—that made the whole project easier to swallow.

As a journalist I was trained to almost surgically remove myself from my stories. That always felt strange to me, that sort of dishonest ghost narration. It was a great relief to give up that pretense and to honestly include all my own reactions and biases in a reported portrait of Iran. Take, for example, the story of young Iranian hedonism. I think no Iranian journalist can write that story without admitting what hopes and disappointments she brings to her perceptions. In *Lipstick Jihad* it felt so liberating to be able to narrate my own process as a reporter and a thinker.

In the end, what most compelled me to write in memoir form was my certainty that an American audience needed a personal story and voice to connect to. Given the ugly history and hostage crisis memories, most Americans think and deal with Iran on a very charged and emotional level. My ultimate aim was to dispel misperceptions and portray the reality of Iranian young people. I wanted to move my audience into reconsidering their thoughts on Iran. I knew dry journalistic reportage would not only never cut through the American psychological fog, but would also quickly become dated. The voice had to be personal.

Q: Was it hard to come up with the title for the book?

A: Absolutely arduous. My first list included really awful ideas like "Khomeini's Daughter" and "Fast Times in Tehran," and my friends razed all my suggestions but offered none of their own. I wanted an evocative and edgy title that would sting a little. A sting captures attention unlike anything else; a sort of good shock, I thought, one that would start a conversation. I was having lunch at the beach one day, trying out "Fashion Jihad" on my tongue, when a friend and I decided to brainstorm other nouns. That's how "Lipstick Jihad" was born. My mother was convinced it would elicit a fatwa or at least a hate crime against me, but I think it just took everyone close to me a while to adapt to such an in-your-face title.

Q: Do you have a writing method? How, when, and where do you write?

A: I can only write first thing in the morning, before my mind is cluttered by all the minor irritations and distractions of the day. Unfortunately, my writing process is not really conducive to a social life. I go to bed by ten, wake up at the obscene hour of four a.m., and write until the quadruple espresso wears off, usually mid-morning. I definitely believe in the discipline of staying behind the glowing screen, even when nothing is coming. Since my life is pretty peripatetic, I write anywhere, often in

hotels, at the homes of friends and relatives, in coffeehouses. The early chapters induced a certain weepiness, and that limited where I could write.

Q: Why weepiness?

A: Well, growing up I was so busy dealing with the tensions of being an Iranian daughter raised in America, I never paused to think about what my parents and grandparents had gone through in the process of emigrating—my grandparents in their dotage in an alien place, my father and uncles trying to support families in the face of prejudice and displacement. They never spoke openly about the pains of assimilation, and I imagined simply that disappointment, confusion, a sense of loss, were a part of their characters. Writing about my childhood meant trying to view exile and immigration through their eyes, and I became conscious of everything they had gone through for the first time.

Q: Speaking of your family, the portraits of your family members are not always the most flattering. How has your family responded to the book?

A: Fortunately, the family member I insulted most energetically cannot read English and lives in the far-flung religious city of Mashad, so at least I've been spared her backlash. The rest shocked me with the sheer unpredictability of their reactions. What I've learned is that it's impossible to gauge how people will respond to a portrait or a mirror. Certain family characters who I imagined would never speak to me again were gracious and even thanked me for a small insight into their biography. Others—throwaway characters whose appearance was scarcely developed—were furious at the inclusion of a seemingly innocuous detail. Taking care of people's feelings after publication is in itself a part-time job, especially since people's responses change in reaction to *other* people's sense of their portrait, so the emotional files are perpetually open.

I compared notes with my friend Tara Bahrapour, who wrote *To See and See Again*, and then felt better, as at least my family in Iran didn't end up threatening me over the book. Tara and I want to do a panel one day on the fury of relatives. Both of us also felt, though, that our books reflected a youthful fearlessness or audacity. I, for one, know I probably wouldn't write such a candid memoir about my family now, when I'm in my thirties.

Q: What about your friends? Do your Iranian counterparts feel that you have captured their world faithfully?

A: The audience I really looked to for that sort of feedback was Iranians who emigrated to the United States or Canada as young adults, fluent enough in English to get through the book but exposed to the changing atmosphere I describe. In a way, we often had the least to say to each other at readings because they would just tell me, "You got it," and we would start talking about other things. It was the Iranians who grew up outside, who have never been to or lived in Iran, who often resisted a portrait of an Iran that is not categorically dark and hopeless.

Q: Has the book been published in Iran?

A: No.

Q: Could it be? How do you imagine it would be received?

A: There is no way it would make it past the government censors, unless perhaps it was annotated so extensively that the footnoted criticism would be a text in itself. It would more easily find its way to Iran translated and posted on the Internet. How would it be received? Without sounding condescending, I think the American scrutiny and openness with which I write about post-revolutionary sexuality and romance, for example, would find a receptive audience in Iran. Given how curious Iranians are about the material and emotional lives of the diaspora, I think the book would be read with curiosity, if with a certain discomfort at being put on the examination table.

Q: Has Iran changed since the writing of the book? In what ways? Do you still feel that your country is "sick"?

A: Although the hardliner president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is busily ruining the economy, daily life has not altered very much. I do sense a palpable loss of hope that the country will become functional or healthy in our lifetime, and I see more young people than ever conniving to emigrate. On the road to the countryside north of Tehran, where young people go to smoke hookahs by the river, there are now giant billboards for emigration lawyers to the West. You didn't see that in the era of President Khatami.

I used to think Iran was just sick, but now I'm starting to wonder if the illness is terminal. The last election depressed me. On top of refusing to take any responsibility for the state of the place, it seemed that Iranians hadn't even learned from their own hard-survived lessons. The more time I spend in Iran at an age where I'm beginning to think about having children, the more I question whether all the reasons that pull me back here can sustain themselves against the degenerating culture of anarchy. Iran does seem to be getting worse, not necessarily at a public or official level, but at the street level. Hiking in the mountains north of Tehran, for example, is one of the few things you can do there outside for fun. On the weekends, the trails are so overrun by poor, angry men from south Tehran spoiling for a fight, that it is dangerous. The atmosphere of the city, the lawlessness that is legitimized by the system itself, feeds this.

Q: Has writing the book changed your life in any tangible way?

A: The book turned me into an overnight expert on Iranian young people, with the implicit expectation that I could—and therefore should—speak on their behalf to the West. That made me very uncomfortable. I think too many Iranians and Iranian-Americans take on that mantle of spokesperson for an Iran that cannot speak for itself, with all sorts of problematic political implications. I found *Lipstick Jihad* inserted me into a policy debate on Iran in America, where it became quite challenging to retain an independent voice without any pretensions of policy analysis or prescription. Lots of policy-makers and thinkers try to recruit someone like me to validate their own agenda on Iran and I found that very disturbing.

On a personal note, I've found it disconcerting making friends or meeting people who think they know me already through my persona on the page. Whether it's confronting a small detail someone already knows, or a judgment they've made, I never imagined I would contend with a pre-existing self. I'm hugely relieved my boyfriend only read the book long after we met!

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