

Lipstick jihad



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In *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran*, Azadeh Moaveni has written a memoir of growing up first as an American girl born of Iranian parents in Southern California, then as an adult working as a reporter for Time magazine while living in Tehran, Iran. Azadeh Moaveni tells of her jihad (struggle) to develop from a self-centered, spoil girl into an adult with recognition that there are billions of others in the world, each of whom has opinions and beliefs that are equally as important as her own.

While living among the community of expatriated Iranians and going to public schools, Azadeh Moaveni sometimes felt she was living a schizophrenic life: at home she was an Iranian daughter of upper middle class Iranians who had escaped Iran just prior to the 1979 revolution that overthrew the Shah of Iran and installed a Moslem Republic in its place. At school and at the mall she felt like an outsider because she was darker skinned and had a name no one could pronounce.

She was ashamed of her parents, ashamed of being an Iranian because so many people remembered the taking of the American hostages and harbored resentment against Iranians. Since she felt out of place in California, Azadeh Moaveni had built a fantasy of what her life Iran would be like; it would be perfect. What she fails to realize is that she was really just a typical teenager; no one feels they fit in while going through adolescence; everyone is ashamed of his or her parents and otherfamilymembers.

Although the book isn't formally divided into two sections, it is in fact divided in this manner. The first four chapters tell of her life growing up in Palo Alto

and San Jose and her first few months working as a reporter. The second half of the book tells about her realization that the beliefs and opinions of others matters; she moves from an egocentric worldview to a more realistic, balanced view of the world and her place in it.

The first chapter, " The Secret Garden," Moaveni tells of her life in the United States living within the Diaspora community of Iranian expatriates. Her parents and others of that generation had been among the upper classes in Iran before the 1789 revolution. In Iran they had lived well, they had servants, and led a life separate from the vast majority of the people of Iran.

In many ways they had absorbed the superior attitude of the British who lived and worked in Iran to exploit the considerable oil resources at the expense of the less privileged members of Iranian society. In the United States they lived in their own Iranian community within the California community at large. Naturally they held a positive, nostalgic belief that Iran of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s was the real Iran and they waited for the Shah or his son to return to power so they could go home.

Azadeh Moaveni had visited Iran once as a child when she and her mother spent a summer with their relatives in her grandfather's walled compound in downtown Tehran. In this compound she felt absolutely free. She climbed the trees and ate the fruit of the trees. Due to this memory from her childhood and to the almost fanatical reverence of Iran that the adults around her believed Azadeh Moaveni developed a fantasy of life in Iran. When she was unhappy that fantasy was her escape from the difficulties of the day-to-day problems of being an adolescent. Consequently, when she

finished college and was looking for a place to work, she chose to return to Tehran.

Azadeh Moaveni called chapter two " Homecoming" because she anticipated that she would finally be where she should be, among her people, people that could pronounce her name, people who could understand her. She was to be disappointed, ". . . we had assumed here, in this country where people could pronounce our names, our world would expand. Instead we felt constricted" (Moaveni, 2005). Everywhere she went she found barriers from the officials, from the police, and from the volunteer, Basig, a group of young toughs who enforced the rules of public dress and behavior with force, if necessary.

Azadeh Moaveni had an elitist attitude indicated by her opinion of the Basig. " The Basig were carefully selected in the poorest of neighborhoods and were cultivated to violence with a skillful balance of brainwashing and small incentives." Certainly the violence practiced by the Basig was wrong, but Azadeh Moaveni's failure to realize the Basig may not have seen their role as making barriers, but of enforcing the Islamic law established by the current administration. The fact that she speaks of them being from the " poorest of neighborhoods" indicates an aristocratic slant to her view of those less fortunate than she was.

Much of her struggle at this point was a failure to look at any issue from any vantage point other than her own. She was very much the California girl. Her priorities were shallow and self-serving. " Celine became my first new Iranian girlfriend, guiding me to the best manicurist, waxing lady, and private pastry

chef in the city with the shared belief that these were urgent priorities."

(67). Throughout the remainder of the first half of the book she exhibited similar attitudes and priorities.

Even her attempts to practice the precepts of Islam were lacking depth. For Ramadan I had "resolved to fast, naively expecting to spend the month in harmony with the daily rhythm of the millions of Iranians around me"

(Moaveni, 2005). When she realized others she knew did not do, she was disappointed and gave up her fasting. Her fantasy view of Iran had begun to crumble.

In the second half of the book, Azadeh Moaveni began to grow. More oppressive violence began to be practiced by the clerical militants in Iran in an attempt to discourage people from voting at all. It was clear to everyone that the reformist President Khatami would win the election, however the more conservative clerics wanted to make sure he did not win with a large enough majority to be able to claim that he had a mandate from the people to make changes and lift restrictions that had been established by the Ayatollah Khomeini when the Islam Republic had been established in 1979.

Khatami was reelected with 78% of the vote with 66% of the people voting (Moaveni, 2005). Many of Azadeh Moaveni's friends had boycotted the election because their vote would mean nothing in a repressive society. She began to realize that the political and educational elite she lived among had little in common with the people who lived in Iran.

Their non-voting meant absolutely nothing. It was irrelevant to the majority of people of Iran. For the first time Azadeh Moaveni began to look beyond

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herself and her class and realize the Iran she carried in her head, was not Iran at all. What she and her friends thought meant nothing. " About six months after I came to Tehran, I put my labors of self-interrogation to rest, happy to nominally consider myself Iranian from America, but mostly happy just to live, and not consider myself so much" (Moaveni, 2005).

When the attack on the United States occurred on September 11, 2001, Azadeh Moaveni was devastated. She couldn't understand why no one seemed to care. The three thousand plus dead was a small number compared to the millions killed in the struggles in Bosnia, the genocide in the Sudan and Somalia. Thousands of men died in the recent Iran-Iraq war. Both sides in this war were armed by the United States. Azadeh Moaveni began to understand the anti-American sentiment throughout the Middle East.

When this book began, I was disappointed. Based on the word " Jihad" in the title and the fact that it had to do with Iran, I expected something more universal than a memoir of a young woman. I felt deceived as if she had composed her title to attract more buyers who saw the word " Jihad" and were interested in learning about the Middle East and not at all interested in another teenager comes of age book.

Throughout the first half of the book I saw little reason to change my opinion. I became more and more disappointed. Frankly, I did not care about Azadeh Moaveni or anything she did or thought. She seemed to be little more than a typical upper middle class teenager who thought the center of the universe coincided with her particular location at any particular moment. She was self-centered, arrogant and egotistical. By the time I had read half of the

book, I was suffering from a Jihad of my own and wondered how I would be able to stand Azadeh Moaveni for the rest of the book.

However, in the second half this changed. Azadeh Moaveni became a woman, a real person who understood that there were other people besides herself and her circle of friends and relatives. She recognized there were millions of people in Iran, and in California for that matter, who lived and struggled and died. Each of them was just as much a person as her educated, young, elite friends, and her relatives who had been made wealthy under the Shah and had made their wealth at the expense of workers in Iran.

By the time I finished reading the book I had come to appreciate it. It was a Jihad for Azadeh Moaveni, a struggle to grow from the girl with childlike fantasies about life into a woman with sensitivity and balanced worldview that was not populated by solely her friends and relatives. It is a book well worth reading, not only for those who like coming of age stories, but for those interested in learning about the Middle East and America's role in the development of its current political, religious and ideological structure.

It can help the reader begin to understand the anti-American attitudes of other countries. Interestingly, the United States has in many ways behaved in the past the way Azadeh Moaveni did in the first half of the book: like a spoiled, self-centered child. Hopefully we will see the same growth that Azadeh Moaveni experienced begin in the United States and its interactions with other countries and peoples.

References

Moaveni, A. (2005). Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran. New York: Public Affairs, a member of Persius Books Group.