That, really, was why I wanted to go to Iran. To see whether the ties that bound me were real, or flimsy threads of inherited nostalgia.

—from Lipstick Jihad

Torn between two cultures

by Jennifer McNulty

Azadeh Moaveni

B.A. Politics, 1998
Oakes College

Growing up in San Jose, Azadeh Moaveni lived what felt like a double life. As the daughter of Iranian exiles, Moaveni served tea to her elders, listened as they spoke of the “year of the great catastrophe” when the Shah was ousted in 1979, and savored the flavors of Persia: fluffy rice with cinnamon, raisins drizzled with saffron, and pomegranates and sour cherry juice.

But Moaveni, like all Iranian Americans, lived in the shadow of the 1979 hostage crisis. She tried to avoid any mention of Americans, lived in the shadow of granates and sour cherry juice.

Women appeared in public wearing colorful veils, and their delicate hands wore golden rings that marked Iran during this time. The nation’s yearnings were convulsing as the regime tries to keep discontent from spilling over into revolt. Rock bands are even allowed to perform in cafés, she adds.

Moaveni, who considers herself Iranian American, says growing up in the United States has never made her the target of hostility or with the exile group in America. I’m one of a small but growing number of Iranians who exist somewhere in the middle.

With its descriptions of the “youth rebellion from below,” Lipstick Jihad fills a void experienced by the children of exiles. “They find it encouraging, heartening, because it gives them something to relate to,” says Moaveni.

The end of Moaveni’s sojourn in Iran coincided with a government crackdown. Her reporting activities were coming under greater scrutiny, and she began to fear for her personal safety.

“After 9/11, terrorism became the heart of her first book, Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran. At 28, Moaveni has already achieved a level of success most twenty-somethings only dream of. She covered the war in Iraq for the Los Angeles Times, just finished collaborating with Iranian human rights activist and 2003 Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi on her memoir, and now covers Middle Eastern affairs for Time magazine.

Moaveni credits UCSC professor Edmund “Terry” Burke of history and heibah “Ronnie” Gruhn of politics with preparing her to ask the right questions, and writing instructor Conn Hallinan, her adviser at City on a Hill, with inspiring her to practice “engaged journalism.”

It was David Dodson, her Oakes College core course instructor, she says, who “taught me how to reflect on personal identity fruitfully.”

“I wanted to go to UC that was like a private school,” she says. “I wanted to go somewhere smaller that paid a lot of attention to students, and that’s exactly the experience I had.”

After graduating with a B.A. in politics in 1998, Moaveni won a Fulbright to study in Cairo. It was a Fulbright to study in Cairo. It was a Fulbright to study in Cairo. It was a Fulbright to study in Cairo. It was a Fulbright to study in Cairo. It was a Fulbright to study in Cairo. It was a Fulbright to study in Cairo. It was a Fulbright to study in Cairo. It was a Fulbright to study in Cairo. It was a Fulbright to study in Cairo. It was a Fulbright to study in Cairo.

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At the same time, Iranians are enjoying greater social freedoms as the regime tries to keep discontent from spilling over into revolt. “Rock bands are even allowed to perform in cafés,” she adds.

Moaveni, who considers herself Iranian American, says growing up in the United States has never made her the target of hostility in the Middle East. “It’s like I’m in a hybrid category,” she explains. “I’m one of the lucky few Iranian Americans with the ability to go back and forth. It’s not about being aligned with the government or with the exile group in America. I’m one of a small but growing number of Iranians who exist somewhere in the middle.

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