

“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 for years to avoid any mention of her background. She recalls cringing on the first day of school each year, waiting for the teacher to mispronounce her name. Trying to blend in, she listened to Madonna, practiced yoga, and flirted with boyfriends.

It was, Moaveni writes in her new memoir about growing up between two cultures, a burden to be Iranian in America. And so she left, beginning an odyssey of per-

sonal and political awakening in the Middle East that launched her career as a journalist and 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 twentysomethings 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 professors Edmund “Terry” Burke of history and Isebill “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

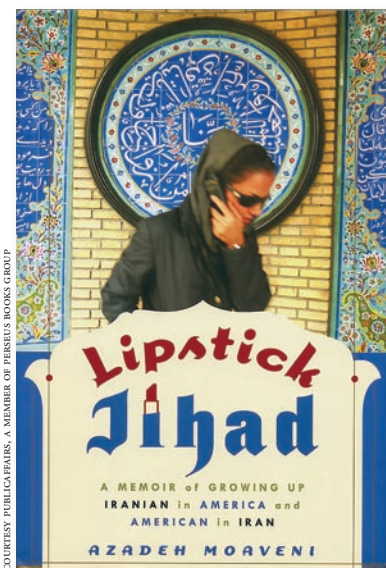
inspiring her to practice “engaged journalism.” It was David Dodson, her Oakes College core course instructor, she says, who “taught me how to reflect on personal identity fruitfully.”

“I wanted to go to a 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, she realizes now, a rest stop that allowed her to work up her courage to make the leap to Iran.

When the first headlines about student unrest

in Tehran appeared in 1999, Moaveni felt a powerful urge to bear witness. Ignoring the warnings of family and friends, she moved to Tehran and found her-



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self perfectly situated to report on Iranian life for an American audience. For the first time, her background and her ability to speak Farsi were assets. She began reporting for *Time*, gaining access to top government officials as well as the educated young people whose yearnings were convulsing the nation.

In *Lipstick Jihad*, Moaveni describes the appearance of independent newspapers for the first time since Islamic fundamentalists took over the country 20 years earlier. Student activists began demanding greater civil liberties. Women appeared in public wearing colorful veils, and their delicate sandals exposed pedicured toes. In Tehran, lovers strolled arm in arm, and crowds of young people refashioned religious holidays into occasions to party in the streets.

Moaveni likens this “cultural rebellion” to a silent coup, saying government reformers’ inability to turn around rampant corruption, economic suffering, and lawlessness led to “society evolving from the bottom up.” It was a heady time, and Moaveni uses a light touch to convey the undulations that marked Iran during

her tenure. Her prose is almost impressionistic, weaving reportage, anecdote, and analysis into a silken textile.

The book has been well-received by critics and readers, including young Iranian Americans who, like Moaveni, were raised in the United States and feel cut off from Iran. 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. She left the country abruptly after riot police clubbed her during a post-soccer-match street celebration.

It was the summer of 2001, and Moaveni returned to the United States—before September 11, before the war on terrorism, before President Bush declared Iran part of the “Axis of Evil.”

“After 9/11, terrorism became reattached to the entire Middle East, and distinctions among

Middle Easterners were lost,” says Moaveni, who covered the war in Iraq and wrote *Lipstick Jihad* before returning to *Time*. Based today in Beirut, she can’t imagine living outside the Middle East. “It’s where I want to be right now because of my work,” she says.

During a recent reporting trip to Iran, Moaveni detected more alienation and apathy in the country than she felt in 2001. “Young people who were active politically have turned off politics,” she says. 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.”