

Too Sexy for a Veil?

Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran

by Azadeh Moaveni

Publicaffairs, 2005

FEBRUARY 2003. I WAS TEACHING LITERATURE AT THE American University of Paris. Parking spaces were blocked off in front of the university's buildings, and anyone entering glanced around first for *camionettes*, any small, suspicious vehicle nearby. It was certainly not the time or place to be a student named "Jihad." But his name was indeed Jihad, and he was my student. I spoke his name with a French accent to avoid an indecorous reiteration of TV-speak—a jihad, holy war, crusade. . . Jihad himself seemed untroubled by the eyebrows his name raised. His casual mien and sartorial sprezzatura spoke of wealth and elegance, complete ease with his person, his history, his future. In truth, he avoided not only coursework but also my gaze during in-class discussions. Jihad graduated that May with a job awaiting him at the family firm in New York.

What sort of a name is "Jihad," anyway, I often asked myself; what does it really mean? In the West we have suggestive names such as Clement, Constance, and Christopher, but these imply character traits diametrically opposed to those I ingenuously associated with "jihad." There had to be more to the word. In her book *Lipstick Jihad*, Azadeh Moaveni supplied my answer: the classical meaning of the word "jihad" in Arabic means "struggle."¹ So, why on earth would wildly affluent Saudi parents name their son Jihad?

With a much less controversial name than my Jihad, author Azadeh Moaveni wished nonetheless as a young girl to change “Azadeh” (which in Farsi means freeborn, noble or free-minded) to the more conventional “Elizabeth” (9). Like thousands of other Iranians in the US, she called herself “Persian” to avoid being linked to the primitive brutality of the hostage crisis or the religious fanaticism which gategashed the revolution. An only child living with a divorced parent in San José, Moaveni grew up wincing at the thought of saying her name or where she was from, only feeling at ease in hippy gatherings under the aegis of a faith she did not claim. “We were embraced with the squishy affection of people fond of the exotic” (10). Eager to find her Middle-Eastern self, Moaveni made a career move in 1999, first to Egypt then on to Iran, where, though she “hated parting with [her] long-cultivated fantasies,” quickly she “began to accept that life in Iran was more a firsthand lesson in the evolution of a tyrannical regime than an ephemeral homecoming to a poetic world of nightingales” (46). Moaveni’s book charts the course of her progress in finding herself and in contributing to the dream of a freer, secular Iran she would like to rebuild. The title itself is intriguing, West colorfully colliding with East, at least on the surface; however, the cultural crisis that she describes taking place in the new Iran is hardly superficial.

By experience, I know that the immigrant condition demands respectful negotiation of seemingly insignificant social niceties. The past thirty years complicated this for displaced Iranians. Dinah (pronounced *Dee-nah*), my midwife in St-Germain-en-Laye, told me she was “Persian.” Her glance darted away before both syllables had hit the air. Knowing I was American, was she afraid of my judgment? At that time, the hostage crisis was more than twenty-five years in the grave. Probably its specter came to her mind, yet at the same time she surely knew how much I admired her, having spent two months in the clinic under her expert care. Did she think my esteem so insubstantial? Reading about Azadeh Moaveni’s feelings of alienation in her youth brought to mind the recently married Dinah with her pride in her new, undeniably French surname. Two years later, however, I ran into a distinctly Iranian Dinah in an underground train station, dressed as she was in the traditional flowing garments particular to Middle-Eastern tastes. The clinic uniform had obscured the customs that she outwardly associated herself with when safely anonymous in a crowd.

Moaveni’s account of modern Iran made me think about how different life in the West was for Dinah, for her courtship, as an example, as compared to the young people described by the author, their attempts to meet in public foiled by the *Basiji* kids, poor youth hired and trained by the regime to be religious militants. Similarly,

Dinah's career could be contrasted with Moaveni's, with ample opportunities for women, wealthy or poor, to be educated and licensed in health professions in France versus dwindling chances for women to work in even the most basic of jobs in Iran, as being caught with a male who was not a member of one's family could result in forced marriage (63). Moreover, whereas Dinah worked in a private clinic in a posh Paris suburb, Moaveni's journalism career was unsurprisingly arduous, even dangerous, due to the Intelligence Ministry's "minders," civil-servant spies who regularly harassed her for information, called her at all hours, and often threatened her. Moaveni's daily experiences give a face to the Iranian struggle as the narration of her personal jihad intertwines with that of others in Iran. For example, she notes the bronze statue of Antigone on her mantel in the same chapter wherein she discovers that one of the empty walled homes in her neighborhood, the quiet, mulberry-treed neighborhood of her childhood, was secretly used to sequester and torture dissidents. Such quandaries send her to reflect upon family, in Iran and in America. Assumptions, decisions, necessarily route through her parents and loved ones:

I felt like I should make a firm decision [...] roll up my sleeves and take up permanent residence in Iran and in some small, modest way, chip away at the edifice of this rotten regime. At this tendency, my father would have rolled his eyes and said (pointedly and in English), "We raised you in California. We sent you to an American university. Get over it." (175)

Lipstick Jihad presents not only a memoir of growing up Iranian in America, and American in Iran, as the title promises, but also pays tribute to the women in Iran at the turn of this century, those who bear it out quietly as well as others who dare to wear sandals, to lift hemlines almost imperceptibly but steadily, and provoke the regime's morality police with heavier make-up. Clothes, headscarves, and, yes, lipstick, are the ammunition of what Azadeh Moaveni calls the "*lipstick jihad*." Lipstick that is removed when the police come into view. Lipstick that is worn as "war-paint" (43): a war waged with symbolic yet innocuous arms deemed dangerous to Iran's official Islamic mores. At a high point in the relaxing of the dress code under President Khatami, she describes women clustered in a shopping mall:

Girls dressed in every color imaginable—veils of bright emerald, violet, buttercup—and in short, coat-like tunics called manteaus that hugged

their curves, capri pants that exposed long stretches of calf, pedicured toes in delicate sandals. (70)

Here Moaveni chronicles Iranian women's quest for cultural artifacts perceived as western; however, in tandem with this silent rebellion to secure even the most basic rights, we see unfold the cultural disaster resulting from repression methods sanctioned by clerics in Qom. In the case of young people, Moaveni laments that simple relations between men and women have been made impossible, as she concludes from a teenage girl's birthday party:

I wondered how many more of such parties I could stand. All the laconic airs, the premeditated exposure of so much flesh. It hadn't been a birthday party so much as a pushing and shoving match with the Islamic Republic; a cultural rebellion waged indoors against the regime's rigid codes of behavior. Those codes banned young men and women from interacting casually together, attending soccer matches, studying at the library. When they were finally permitted a few free hours in each other's company, they scarcely knew what to do, or how to behave. They had never developed a sense of what normal behavior between the sexes looked like; not only were they lacking a template, they found the prospect of normality unsatisfying. Instead, they sought to contrast the oppressive morality outside with amplified decadence behind closed doors, staking out their personal lives as the one realm in which they could define their individuality, and exercise their free will. The realm where the system tried to intrude, but ultimately could not control. The Islamic Republic does not control me; see it in the layers of makeup I apply to my face, the tightness of my jeans, the wantonness of my sex life, the Ecstasy I drop. (83)

The jihad burns within, though perhaps not always in a productive way. Seeking to become what the regime despises doubly signifies a lack of free will. Worse, German porn establishes the "template" Moaveni mentions above, rather than relaxed interactions with the opposite sex (188). Nefarious effects on the culture are visible in the unsatisfying marriages Moaveni describes, but also in other simpler human relations: repression techniques, among other demeaning practices, had broken down the traditions she knew as a child, namely respect toward elders, especially women:

Clashes between socially deprived teenagers and vigilante thugs were always volatile, and black eyes and broken arms were not uncommon. Often their worried parent accompanied teenagers out on such evenings, and when a riot threatened to erupt, matronly moms with gray hairs peeking out from under flowered headscarves beseeched the vigilantes—with the cultural authority an Iranian woman of fifty-five should have over a boy of fifteen—to put their clubs and chains (their weapons of choice) away. Their efforts met little success. The Basij were carefully selected in the poorest of neighborhoods and were cultivated to violence with a skillful balance of brainwashing and small incentives. I hated watching these scenes. I hated how I could scarcely recognize the traditions I grew up with in the Iran around me. I hated how the Islamic Republic not only dissolved the ties between exiles and Iran, but those between Iranians and their own culture. (59)

Moaveni documents her increasing bewilderment over the direction the country has taken along with her search for linguistic and cultural familiarity in a country she had only known as a child prior to the revolution and later through kitchen-table narratives in California. The cloud of the Revolution always near, her perceptions of the new Iran, its population, its leaders, must pass through what she was taught by her exiled Iranian family in the US as well as through the clerics' political intentions before solidifying into a foothold in her progress of becoming "Iranian." Predictably, as related in her chapter "I'm Too Sexy for My Veil," veiling symbolizes her conflict with the regime:

Ayatollah Khomeini probably did not consider the damage the veil would inflict on women's hair, when he mandated Islamic modesty. Besides split ends and a perpetual lack of volume, the veil intensified the general sadness many women were prone to feeling over all the things that were wrong in their personal lives, and in the country at large. (156)

Although Moaveni balances social critique with humor, underscoring the regime's disregard for women and women's rights remains one of her chief aspirations for the book. The author describes the humiliation of having to wear a veil in her native America, in New York City at the United Nations Plaza Hotel where President

Khatami was to give a press conference. Her opposition and final acquiescence equally visit the Revolution:

First there was my opposition to the veil, inherited from both sides of my family, an heirloom value that every single one of us—monarchists, secularists, socialists, capitalists, dilettantes—held dear. We did not negotiate with the veil. It was the symbol of how everything had gone horribly wrong. How in the early days of the revolution, secular women wore the veil as a protest symbol against the West and its client state policies, and then had it imposed on them by the fundamentalist mullahs who hijacked the revolution and instituted religious law. My generation, Iranians who learned about 1979 at kitchen tables in the United States, absorbed this version of history as truth. Though most women in modern-day Iran might not consider the veil their highest grievance, they knew it symbolized the system's disregard for women's legal status in general. Mandatory veiling crushed women's ability to express themselves, therefore denying them a basic human right. (170)

Nonetheless, for the press conference she submits to covering her head though other reporters "took one look at my covered head and informed me imperiously that I was not required to veil . . . that I was doing the other women there a disservice by doing so" (172). Still, to maintain cordial relations with the president's men, to preserve their image of her and her support of their reforms, Moaveni's head remained covered for the interview. Ironically, the same evening one of the president's translators, less certain of his commitment to the Islamic Republic of Iran than she, sought a private interview with her in order to get leads on jobs in the US (173). This incident finds a parallel in Moaveni's first visit to Qom, where she interprets for a male *Time* correspondent in interviewing a cleric. While translating between the two, she must rebuff overt advances from the cleric: "Convinced their worst sin was sloth, I had not assumed they were equally lecherous" (85-86). Laid bare as Moaveni painstakingly dismantles the new Iran for herself and her readers, hypocrisy, among other ills, preserves the regime by denying women their rights.

Moaveni's accounts invite East-West comparisons regarding wider-world dilemmas. As the Palestinian bi-colored scarves, *keffeyehs*, emblemize the struggle of the voiceless, the veil in France can hardly be separated from the war waged between the economically weak in the *cités* (the projects) and the more affluent. And this despite the then Grand Mufti of Marseilles, Soheib Ben Cheikh, having,

on national television, disagreed with *intégriste* families who demanded their daughters take the veil; he asserted that in the past, a veil protected a woman, while today education does, a stance repeated in the 21 January 2004 issue of *Le Parisien*:

The veil leads young women down the wrong path. Nothing in the Koran forces them to display their faith in this way. The veil leads too often to disturbing behavior, such as refusing to mix with others, sexual equality, biology courses or sports. I am in favor of the law against religious signs at school as teachers should not have to be on the frontlines of this debate [...] Protection for women today is instruction and education.

Though Jacques Chirac's initiative to ban veiling in secondary schools met with broad public approval as a secular advance, veiling has taken on a stronger statement for college-age girls in the public universities.

I cannot forget Samia, a twenty-year old student from the Val de Marne who, the first year I knew her, was quiet though productive in class. She passed her exams in May and worked in the summer to gain some professional experience. Shortly after the new semester began, however, Samia appeared in a wide white veil bordered heavily with eyelet lace, smiling to herself beneath it and even more isolated from the others than before. She stopped attending class regularly, though presence was mandatory. Curious as to the nature of her transformation, I let her absenteeism slide. The grapevine announced that she was to marry, which for the initiated, explained the change in appearance. Gradually, she began to show defiance in class toward teachers and other students. As one might expect, the next step was to abandon her studies, and I know from her friend, the only other student in her class with a veil, that she blamed all of us, teachers and classmates alike, for rejecting her. Ninety-five percent of my Muslim students had adopted Western clothing and mannerisms. Out of choice, Samia took another path. Her story is one of my own disappointments, not because of her veil but because of the way she assumed we all felt about it. Choice exists in France, though there can be a terrible cost—families' or boyfriends' "punishment" of young girls, beaten or, worse, bearing the scars of burns or vitriol on their faces, or even being burnt alive as in a 2002 Vitry-sur-Seine case. Hardly the norm yet not uncommon, Samia's story of defiance in a country which guarantees her human rights contrasts painfully with Moaveni's accounts of the young women struggling to assert themselves under Iran's current regime, one of the most notoriously oppressive for women in the Middle East. This struggle also comes at some psychological cost, in one's life as well as in romantic relationships:

Confronting hardship together didn't magically turn your relationship, or your life for that matter, into Casablanca. Struggle, it turned out, is about as romantic as leprosy. It makes you emotionally absent. It gives you the most compelling, lofty reasons ever to avoid dealing with your emotional problems (you're too busy with *The Struggle*, of course). It makes you live exclusively in the present. It makes emotions besides hate a luxury. Because in the end, life in the shadow of struggle is really just life in the shadows. (191)

Women's liberation in the West was not a simple point in history, but rather our own jihad that continues on linguistic, cultural and professional fronts. As suggested by Moaveni, women in the Middle-Eastern world will have to bear out a similar revolution for choice to become a norm. Can we help? Moaveni surprises us by pointing out a desire for American intervention in a later *Washington Post* article:

On a recent afternoon, while riding a rickety bus down Vali Asr Avenue, Tehran's main thoroughfare, I overheard two women discussing the grim state of Iranian politics. One of them had reached a rather desperate conclusion. "Let the Americans come," she said loudly. "Let them sort things out for us once and for all." Everyone in the women's section of the bus absorbed this casually, and her friend nodded in assent. Although their leaders still call America the "Great Satan," ordinary Iranians' affection for the United States seems to be thriving these days, at least in the bustling capital. This rekindled regard is evident in people's conversations, their insatiable demand for U.S. products and culture, and their fascination with the U.S. presidential campaign. One can't do reliable polling about Iranians' views under their theocratic government, of course, but these shifts were still striking to me as a longtime visitor—not least because liking the United States is also a way for Iranians to register their frustration with their own firebrand president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.²

This confidence in our international expertise in righting wrongs flatters, yet the careful language of the Iraqi Constitution with regard to women proves that foreign powers simply cannot effect lasting change; deep change must come within, and unavoidably at a price. This is a comfortable statement to make from my circa

Louis XVI lady's writing desk, which reminds me of yet another revolution from which as a Westerner I have undeniably benefited. Nevertheless, we can take up our pen to support courageous women, the idealistic Moaveni as well as those women who have been refused their basic human rights due to a flawed vision of "revolution" initiated in Iran in 1979:

Many of the reformists came from an ultra-traditional class that held more conservative social values than the majority of Iranians. Because they were enamored with Western philosophy and borrowed all their ideas about freedom and rights from thinkers such as Kant and Habermas, they were starting to see that their vision of an open society was incompatible with individual rights. But they were as yet too narrow to include women in the category of individual. This was the Achilles heel of their movement, this foolish idea that they could take a Western concept, like democracy, alter it with Islamic attitudes toward women, and expect it to function properly. (77)

If anything, as the world has realized, the Khatami era in post-revolution Iranian politics marked a high point in reform, whereas Ahmadinejad's administration has deferred largely to clerical hardliners. In an editorial for the *Wall Street Journal*, Moaveni describes the fate of one of Iran's most prominent women, Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi:

Last Thursday, local police stood by and allowed a group of "demonstrators"—most likely thuggish young men dispatched by the regime's hard-line *Basij* militia—to attack her home and office. It was the most alarming act of violence the state has permitted against her in nearly two decades of intimidation and threats. In late December, the authorities closed her Center for Defenders of Human Rights on the grounds that it was operating without a permit. Government agents raided her private office, seizing her computers and files. Though the government has long viewed Ms. Ebadi uneasily, it has been forced to abide her in recent years because of the popular base of her support. Until now, the state has bullied her only discretely, and the timing and hostility of the present moves against her say a great deal about both her influence and where Iran stands today.³

Could Jacques Barzun's four revolutions in the West be completed by a fifth, ensuring women's rights and emancipation on a larger scale? In the 14 October 2006 issue of *The Jewish Chronicle*, renowned French writer and philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy borrows from Emmanuel Levinas, the philosopher of the face, to voice his own opinion: "[having seen] the naked face of your interlocutor, you cannot kill him or her, you cannot rape him, you cannot violate him. So when the Muslims say that the veil is to protect women, it is the contrary. The veil is an invitation to rape." Whether or not we agree, it seems that the women concerned should have the choice of wearing the veil or not, of taking up higher studies, of marrying, of working outside of the home. Without reiterating the articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted, may I remind readers, in 1948, I will simply add that Moaveni's most recent book, *Honeymoon in Tebran*,⁴ concludes with the author, recently married, renouncing life in Iran where it became impossible for her to pursue her career in safety. Indeed, "born free," as her name suggests, she had this choice. Though I have no worries about Jihad's human rights in his downtown Manhattan firm, I wonder about his sisters, female cousins, and wife.

Notes

1. *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran*, Azadeh Moaveni, New York: Publicaffairs, 2005. (ix).
2. "Stars (and Stripes) in Their Eyes: Most of the Middle East hates America, but Iranians see a more appealing image." *The Washington Post*, June 1, 2008, p. B01.
3. "Iran's Nobel Laureate has become a target of the regime: Ahmadinejad hopes to dispirit moderates by bullying Shirin Ebadi." *The Wall Street Journal*, January 6, 2009, p. A15.
4. *Honeymoon in Tehran*, Azadeh Moaveni, New York: Random House, 2009.

Oklahoma native **ANDREA TROCHA-VAN NORT** lived in France and taught English and economics in private schools, private universities, and four different public universities over

fifteen years. She returned to the United States in 2007 to teach English at the United States Air Force Academy.