

# The Mullahs And Me

*A memoir by a young Iranian-American journalist who fell into a funk in Tehran.*

## LIPSTICK JIHAD

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

By Azadeh Moaveni.

249 pp. PublicAffairs. \$25.

By ALEXANDRA STARR

**A**ZADEH MOAVENI'S journalism career began under extraordinarily favorable circumstances. Born in Palo Alto, Calif., and raised in the Iranian diaspora, she landed in Tehran in 1999, just as reformers seemed on the verge of forcing the mullah theocracy to loosen its grip. It was the hottest story in the Middle East, and Moaveni covered it from an unusually close perch. Because she had dual citizenship, she could base herself in the Iranian capital — an option generally unavailable to American journalists.

Moaveni's two years as a stringer for Time magazine in Iran are now fodder for a book. Once again, her timing is propitious. "Lipstick Jihad" appears just as the Bush administration ratchets up its rhetoric on this spoke in the evil axis. Readers hoping for a primer on one of the world's most cloistered societies will come away disappointed, however. Iran is essentially only the backdrop for the real focus of this memoir: the solipsistic funk that enveloped Moaveni when she tried to fit into a deeply alienating world.

Using her personal experience as a narrative would have worked better if it were accompanied by a broader portrait of Iranian society. As Moaveni herself admits, "my private misery was highly specialized" and not particularly revealing of the life of most Iranians. It's interesting to learn the way President Bush's tough talk played into the hands of the country's hard-liners. And Moaveni provides a nuanced description of the situation of Iranian women, pointing out that in the past 20 years opportunities actually improved for girls born into middle-class, religious families. But to get to the substantive nuggets, you'll

need to wade through Moaveni's fraught relationship with her mother, failed romances and days in her pajamas watching Oprah. Insights into Iranian society are almost always offered in relation to herself. It is in the course of weighing whether to get a nose job, for instance, that she discusses the corruption eating away at the Iranian medical system.

Part of Moaveni's problem is the unrealistic expectations she brought with her to Tehran. She figured she would assimilate into a country she scarcely knew in "a month, at most." Moaveni also expected to witness the fall of Iran's tyrannical regime. Early signs were promising. The moderate cleric Mohammad Khatami had recently been elected president, followed by a reformist Parliament. Students were taking to the streets. But the hard-liners, who have final say over elected politicians' proposals, stalemated real reform. Still, Iranians did push the envelope: veils became more revealing, young people dropped Ecstasy, and grandmothers had banned satellite dishes installed.

**B**UT defiance in personal behavior didn't translate into political change. In fact, the already slow pace of reform ground to a halt after President Bush's "axis of evil" pronouncement, according to Moaveni. The idea that the country was under attack gave the hard-liners an excuse to stifle even mild dissent. When the government employee who regularly monitored her demanded to vet her articles, Moaveni packed her bags. She is now a reporter for The Los Angeles Times, living in Beirut.

Moaveni writes unusually well and perceptively. She was obviously miserable in Iran, and with reason. It is humiliating to live in a repressive culture. It is disjunctive to feel alienated from a society you have a blood stake in. But she might have fared better beating back the black dogs — and written a better book — had she stopped ruminating on her predicament and more closely observed the plight of people around her. □

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