
Young and Restless in Tehran

Azadeh Moaveni

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

PublicAffairs, 2005,

260 pages.

and

Roxanne Varzi

**Warring Souls: Youth, Media,
and Martyrdom in
Post-Revolution Iran**

Duke University Press, 2006,

290 pages.

Reviewed by Marla Braverman

In one of her book's sillier moments, Iranian-American journalist Azadeh Moaveni recounts her attempt to totter home on the streets of Tehran after one too many drinks at a friend's party. Doing so, she explains, was a dangerous proposition: Had she been stopped by the *Basiji*, the regime's Islamic vigilantes, she might have been sent to the local precinct and subjected to a virginity check. Her

friend, aware the situation was potentially disastrous, flags down a passing garbage truck and hauls them both inside. "We occupied the stinking, one-foot gap between the trash and the cabin," she explains. "Do. You. Realize. What. You've. Done? This is garbage! I'm being transported with *refuse*. This is madness. Why don't you people revolt or something?" But then, as the truck lurches along, she suddenly feels a warm sense of security settle over her. "With someone who knew the gaps in the rules," she muses happily, "there is adventure to be had behind the grim, rigid façade of the Islamic Republic."

Adventure? To the outside eye, Iran looks like a monochromatic palette of law-abiding Islamic citizens, a place where drugs, partying, sex, and even romance appear not to exist. This is particularly the case today, a year and a half after the departure of President Mohammad Khatami from office. Khatami's initial efforts to shift the focus from an "Islamic" to an Iranian national identity, and to dissociate physical appearance from

the character of the regime (he once stated that “just because someone shaves his beard does not mean that he is not a practicing Muslim”) led in the early years of his presidency to a slackening of certain rules that had once defined the public sphere. For a brief yet buoyant historical moment, couples strolled down the streets hand in hand; *hejabs* revealed bare ankles, and veils a few inches of hairline; and boys drove their dates home late at night. True, the changes were modest, but many people, both in Iran and in the West, saw in them the first, faint glimmer of democracy to come.

The landslide election of hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency in 2005, however, just one year after the conservatives re-took the *Majiles* (parliament), revealed the Iran of Khatami to be little more than a prettier cage. On account of the discord and disorganization among the reformists’ ranks, the fierce and underestimated determination of the mullahs to retain their grip on the state, and, finally, the United States’ designation of Iran as one-third of the “Axis of Evil” after September 11—a move that allowed the regime to crush opposition in the name of “national security”—Iran’s homegrown democratic movement appears to have been stopped dead in its tracks.

At least, this is how it appears on the surface.

A closer look reveals that resistance is hardly a thing of the past. While the Iranian people are not politically active in the traditional sense, they are nonetheless involved in resistance of a different type. In place of articles and demonstrations, Iranians—and particularly Iran’s youth, who comprise more than 70 percent of the population—are waging what Iranian scholar Abbas Milani has termed a “passive revolution”: A widespread cultural rebellion, characterized by engaging in behaviors antithetical to the values of the regime. As Moaveni explains in *Lipstick Jihad*, one of two recent books to examine the phenomenon of social resistance among urban, middle-class Iranian youth, the regime does not officially sanction, say, colorful headscarves, makeup, or baseball caps. Rather, young people do it themselves, in a deliberate act of defiance: “A jihad, in the classical sense of the word: A struggle.” Whether this passive struggle has the potential to effect a transition to democracy in the Islamic Republic is far from clear. Yet as both America and Israel evaluate the conflict with Iran and the prospects for the emergence of a new regime, this cultural jihad may be far more decisive a factor than is commonly understood.

Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran, and Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran, by anthropologist Roxanne Varzi, are both attempts to determine how an ideological public sphere affects the lives, identities, and worldviews of those who have come of age in it. While their projects may differ dramatically, both authors, members of the vast Iranian diaspora community in California, were motivated to study Iranian youth culture for personal reasons: These young people, targets of the more than two-decades long Islamization project, Varzi explains, are who she would have been had her family, like Moaveni's, not left Iran shortly after the revolution. Consequently, their efforts not only to examine, but also to empathize with, the youth they encounter make for intimate works that are both engaging and informative.

The culture they describe will surprise most readers. For if, as Varzi maintains, Iranian youth are an index of the success of the regime's Islamization project, the revolution may be deemed a dismal failure: The rift between Iranian youth and the severe politics of the ruling clergy has perhaps never been wider. The regime attempted to secularize Iranian society by enforcing new, "Islamic" rules of behavior, including a strict dress code

that physically identified individuals as good Muslims and nationals; a ban on all images and media considered "Western" in values or sympathy, including books, radio, television, and films; and rules for conduct between the sexes according to strict religious criteria, which effectively keep them apart. Yet while outwardly obedient, Iranian youth find that knowing how to navigate the system, as well as using a bit of creativity, opens the door to freedom. They contrive ways to throw wild parties replete with alcohol, drugs, and premarital sex; they cruise down Jordan Street, Tehran's main drag, with Western music blaring from cassette tapes in their cars; they watch *Friends* via illegal satellite dishes; and fill chat rooms and blog spots with anti-regime diatribe. (According to a recent article in MIT's *Iran Analysis Quarterly*, more than 90 percent of Iranian blogs believe that the regime is "unacceptable.") Indeed, when Varzi tries to photograph a billboard of a young martyr, her teenage Tehranian cousin becomes enraged, insisting that "This is not Iran—these are forms of government propaganda." In study after study, young Iranians express a desire to live and study abroad, with the United States as their destination of choice.

Perhaps no one is as surprised by the reality of Iranian life as Moaveni,

who covered the student demonstrations in Tehran in 1999 and then moved back a year later as a stringer for *Time* magazine. Moaveni describes the constant “otherness” she felt as an Iranian growing up in America, particularly in the aftermath of the Iranian hostage crisis. Combined with the Iranian diaspora community’s deep-rooted, saffron-tinted sense of nostalgia, and her prerevolution, halcyon memories of climbing mulberry trees, snuggling into Oriental pillows, and licking pistachio ice cream on Pahlavi Boulevard, it is easy to see why she always considered her “Iranianness” the stronger of her two national identities. But when she sets up shop in Tehran in 2000 to cover the budding student democratic movement, explaining that she expected her integration into Iranian culture to take “a month, at most,” she finds instead that “being a Persian girl in California... was, like, a totally different thing than being a young Iranian woman in the Islamic Republic of Iran.” She is appalled that women must wear the veil and *roopoosh* (a long, loose, figure-hiding coat) even while jogging (“I tried to stick it out, tried to get to the point where I forgot I was running.... But the whole time I imagined portly ministers treading water in *Farmanieh* pool... and I overheated as much with irritation and resentment”); stunned that mocking mullahs had

become a national sport, evidenced in the craze among the upper class for poodles, against which the clerical establishment had issued a *fatwa*; and petrified by her weekly shakedown with a government minder she calls Mr. X, whose job, she concluded, was initially to ensure she was not a CIA agent and to control her reporting, and later “to torment me as a person.”

The fact that Moaveni generally manages to amuse as much as to analyze makes all the more disturbing those few serious moments, such as her description of the casual violence of the *komiteh*, or morality police, against youth on the street, and we come away from *Lipstick Jihad* with a sense of understanding the daily strains that characterize a life defined by barriers, prohibitions, and fear. It is unfortunate, then, that so much of her narrative is devoted to her own insecurities about speaking Farsi, her complaints about being taken for a prostitute because she dares to smoke in public, and the couch-ridden bouts with depression she suffers on account of being labeled a “foreigner”; of the mullahs having stolen “my Iran”; and of the impossibility of reconciling the chaos and perversity of the Islamic Republic with the romantic Iran of her childhood memories. Having to wade through page after page of her private misery, and to view every aspect of Iranian life in relation to

her own defensive perspective on it, detracts from the real value of the book: An insider's view of the life of a proud people living under a repressive government.

Roxanne Varzi, the recipient of the first Fulbright grant for research in Iran awarded since the revolution, also sought to study Iranian youth from the "inside," by living in the culture under examination. The result, *Warring Souls*, is a combination of various narrative voices based on her historical and ethnographic research, entries from her own journals, and those of the study group she put together; and vignettes based on interviews, observation, and archival research. She is primarily interested in the regime's manipulation of images—initially, those of Ayatollah Khomeini, and afterward of the soldiers killed in the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s—to create Islamic subjects within an Islamic social space. Her description of that space, and the conscious and unconscious ways it works on its inhabitants, is fascinating: During a visit to Istanbul, for example, Varzi, accustomed to the ubiquitous posters of martyrs that cover Iranian buildings, asks her Turkish friend "when the young boys in the posters covering the side of a building were martyred. 'That's our national soccer team,' she laughs. I continue to stare at them as if they are dead, however:

Death is imbedded in every thought, in every public image of a young man displayed."

Varzi is particularly attracted to the study of film, which has been used both by the establishment (in the case of Morteza Avini's classic film series *Witness to Glory*, the longest-running documentary on the Iran-Iraq War) to encourage martyrdom, and by the opposition (in the case of Ebrahim Hatamikia's *The Scent of Yusef's Shirt*) to re-think that war and revolutionary values in general. Varzi is at her most interesting, however, when she, like Moaveni, turns to the quiet resistance of Iranian youth against the government's conflation of religious faith and political identity, revealing that same Islamic social space to be, in part, a mirage:

In Tehran, the most creative consumers of the city are the youths who have developed an entire system in order to operate around the *komiteh*. Such youths have found that the most important components of survival (transgression) in Tehran are a fit body, a fast car (or a clever driver), and knowledge of geography.

She goes on to explain that while the Alborz Mountains contain Tehran in their tight grip, they also provide those fit enough to hike beyond the well-trodden walking paths an escape from the *komiteh's* prying eyes. So, too, can someone in a small, fast car

turn up one of Tehran's steep streets and lose the *komiteh's* large, beat-up vehicles. These are only some of the "ingenious ways" in which Iranian youth resist the clerical regime and attempt to carve out a sense of individual liberty amidst a public culture that would deny it.

Another way in which the women and youth of the Islamic Republic carry out their quiet resistance is through the appropriation of the two main methods by which the regime enforces its ideology: Dress and ritual. Accordingly, both *Lipstick Jihad* and *Warring Souls* devote ample space to discussing the methods of "working around" rules designed to create a sense of uniformity among the population. As Moaveni explains, "At some historic moment impossible to pinpoint, around the turn of the millennium, Iranians' threshold for dissimulation and constriction sank.... Women started wearing lipstick, exposing their toes and curves, wearing their veils halfway back, 'as if' they had a right to be uncovered." Of course, it would be wrong to assert that the clerical establishment has simply conceded its helplessness to stem the tide of this unspoken movement. As Moaveni shows in her description of a Tehranian women-only fashion show, where models sported an array of stylish-yet-regulation *rooposh's*, the regime sometimes

manages to slacken the ropes just enough to quell opposition without losing control: "One part of me shivered with delight at the thought of a fashion show in the Islamic Republic. A public event dedicated to the expression and aesthetic of femininity, in a place so hostile to all things feminine and physical. Another part of me registered disappointment, because a regime-sanctioned catwalk signaled a societal entrenchment of the veil. I'd much rather be driving to a demonstration where women burned head scarves, rather than modeled them."

Finally, the most comical example of Iranian youth's exploitation of the regime's "Islam preoccupation" for their own social purposes is that of the Muslim holiday of *Ashoura*, which commemorates the murder of Mohammed's grandson Hossein in Karbala. While the regime treats the holiday with the utmost seriousness—the city is draped in black, mosques blare solemn chants—Iranian teenagers view the candlelight vigil marking its conclusion as the best means to pick up members of the opposite sex. Indeed, Moaveni is stunned to see women marching with mourning candles tuck slips of paper with their phone number up their sleeves, so that they can slip them to lucky "fellow mourners" as they pass by. Just as the chador, or traditional

full-body covering, is frequently used to cover illegal satellite dishes, the symbols of government repression are frequently the selfsame ones used to excuse and cover acts of cultural rebellion. In so doing, Varzi writes, Iranians “re-invest the power in the ritual or the covering from the hand of the state that imposes it to the citizen who uses it.”

It is customary to think about Iran in terms of two ticking alarm clocks, one nuclear, and the other democratic. If the democratic one does not ring first, so this thinking goes, military intervention may be required to stop the nuclear one from going off. Ideally, one would like to find in these books reason to hope that the widespread “passive revolution” may indeed reach a tipping point, at which time it would lead to the toppling of the current regime. Unfortunately, while both Moaveni and Varzi show the reality of Iranian society to be far more nuanced and complex than we might otherwise have believed it to be, they do not seem convinced that such a tipping point is on the horizon.

For starters, the contradictions inherent in the daily lives of Iranian youth—outwardly engaging in a ritual of mourning, but in fact scoping out available partners; playing Western music in one’s car, but keeping a tape

of sermons from the Koran in one’s glove compartment in the event of *komiteh* searches—are not, as Varzi emphasizes, conscious transgressions. Rather, they are the ways in which young men and women in Iran have managed to reject the regime-defined “reality” in favor of a personal one. The result is a kind of double existence responsible for what many people call Iran’s “lost generation”—a mass of confused, angry, and alienated individuals. One of Moaveni’s friends explains this phenomenon best when he tells her that “lies are natural for people here. Having a façade is normal, because being honest is such a hassle. You have to decide what bothers you most—lying all the time, or the consequences of openness.” Moaveni concedes that this is an impossible set of choices. Nonetheless, it is one that Iranian youth must confront on a daily basis, and which leaves them with little energy—or hope—for a revolution.

So, too, have young people’s attempts to compensate for the regime’s culture of prohibitions led to a dangerous inability to interact with fellow citizens in a normal manner. This is particularly true of members of the opposite sex: In Moaveni’s description of an under-the-radar coed birthday party, for example, she notes that it “hadn’t been a birthday party so much as a pushing and shoving

match with the Islamic Republic.” Girls whip off tunics to reveal mini-skirts that would rival those of Ally McBeal, and boys barely into puberty take shots and smoke pot. Starved for each other’s company, young men and women, when they finally do get together, are both confused and determined to one-up each other’s displays of decadence—neither of which helps them develop strong friendships or intimate relationships, the building blocks of a healthy civil society.

Finally, because survival on the streets of Iran requires a degree of selfishness, or an ability to look out for oneself first and foremost, young people find it difficult to trust each other. Indeed, they are encouraged to tell on strangers, friends, or even family members who engage in prohibited or “anti-Islamic” behaviors, creating a culture of suspicion and guilt. It is not surprising then, that the government has begun to sponsor television shows on psychology, encouraging youth to “speak out” about their problems (an ironic suggestion in a country whose response to “speaking out” ranges from public lashings to indeterminate prison stays). Last, there is a glaring disrespect for government authorities and the rule of law, which many Iranian youth feel that they in fact operate above—an attitude that does not bode well for a potential democratic

regime, grounded in the rule of law and respect for its institutions.

It is clear, then, why both books end on a somewhat pessimistic note. Moaveni, forced to leave Iran by an increasingly threatening Mr. X, concludes that she could never find contemporary Iran home: At least for now, she writes, “there would be no revolution that returned Iran to us [the Iranian diaspora community], and we would remain adrift.” Ultimately, she concludes that the “real Iran” exists equally in Tehran and California, where the outside world can be forgotten, and Iranians can revive the memories of a culture that existed before their country was disfigured by a hard-liner regime.

Varzi also concedes that while the project to produce Islamic subjects may not have been completely successful, it would be naïve to declare that the twenty-year effort has not had some lasting effects. One of them is the seemingly ingrained belief among post-revolution Iranian youth that citizens must always bow to the dictates of a single, strong leader. In her recounting of a student hiking trip at her book’s conclusion, Varzi describes how, “for group events ranging from ski trips to private parties there was nothing that was done spontaneously or from individual initiative. The group was always consulted; everyone participated once the activity was

decided on, and there was always somehow a de facto leader (chosen usually for age and experience) whom everyone deferred to.” No one, Varzi realized, believed that there could be harmony without a leader to make the final decisions. “Voting simply could not replace this function.” If this is the attitude entrenched in young, Western-loving, freedom-seeking Iranian students—America’s best hope for a democratic uprising—then it is easy, she contends, to believe that the regime is here to stay.

This conclusion, however, leaves much to be desired. With each passing day, both the regime as a whole and the hard-line presidency of Ahmadinejad become increasingly repressive and increasingly unpopular. In a country with a sizable middle class, a stagnant economy, a strong collective memory of better days, and a precedent of popular revolution, it seems premature to dismiss the hope for change on the basis of the “passivity” of the lipstick jihad. And while the follow-the-leader culture that Varzi describes may not produce the

best kind of democratic citizens, it certainly opens the door for the possibility that a small number of bold, well-organized young leaders could encourage a large number of followers when the time comes for the protest to become active, and political.

Indeed, while most Iranian youth are understandably wary of the consequences of organized political protest, a group of students at Amir Kabir University this past December may have reignited the flame of student activism when, in the name of personal and academic freedom, they burned pictures of Ahmadinejad and shouted “death to the dictator” during a speech by the president on campus. There is no telling what effect this protest may yet have on the two-thirds of the Iranian population that oppose the regime—and especially on the disaffected, rebellious youth upon whom the nation’s future rests.

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