

## **Traditional Iran, Modern Rebellion**

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In her memoir *Lipstick Jihad*, Azadeh Moaveni presents her reader with a striking picture of Iran circa the year 2000, and explains how while living in Iran, she is caught between the fundamentalist Islamic government and the secular youth culture. She describes in detail the daily clashes between the hard-line, religious rule and the Tehrani youth movement—a movement defined above all else by its dedication to being “modern”. Moaveni uses the word “modern” to mean numerous things—at times contemporary, trendy, socially permissive, secular, Western--but there is always one element that remains constant: modern is *not* the Islamic Republic. “Modern”, then, encompasses all the efforts at rebellion against the Islamic Republic. Modernity, to Moaveni, represents Iranians’ attempts at reclaiming their freedoms from an oppressive and unwanted regime.

To many Iranian women in the memoir, to be “modern” is to conform to certain standards of beauty and fashion. Speaking of the waves of Iranian women getting plastic surgery at the time, Moaveni uses “modern” in this way. She says:

It was an investment in feeling modern, in the midst of the seventh-century atmosphere the mullahs were trying to create. It assuaged so many urges at once—to look better, to self-express, to show that you could afford it, to appear

Westernized. The compulsion to work these interior issues out through one's appearance was a curious phenomenon unique to revolutionary Iran. In a way, it was dysfunctional—picking the scab of a right you didn't have. (Moaveni 164)

Here, “modern” means several things: vain, Western, individualist, but on a deeper level it represents taking control of one's own life. It represents a rejection of the physical modesty that the mullahs force onto women in the form of the veil and hijab. The religious zealots may be able to choose what the women wear, but they cannot choose how they look. Though each Iranian woman may have her own reasons for changing the way she looks, every plastic surgery, every display of Western vanity, is an act of rebellion against a state hell-bent on micromanaging her life.

Like the Iranian women, the youth in Tehran also express themselves through attempts at modernity, and these attempts often manifest themselves as imitation or acceptance of American cultural phenomena. But to Moaveni, the relationship between the drive to be “modern” that permeates Iranian society and Western culture is close, but complicated. She describes young Tehranis' lust for American commercial institutions like fast food and Victoria's Secret, and defends them against her mother's criticism, arguing that their taste for Western consumerism is not an acceptance of American imperialism in the region but a way for young people to “register their discontent with the religious conservatives who controlled their country” (210). Thus, modern as “American” stands as an act of rebellion.

Though on one hand she defends American-type materialism as an appropriate release for frustrated young people, she also makes it clear that materialism doesn't signal a modern society

in and of itself. She laments how, for many Iranians, the Western-style shopping mall state of Dubai has become the epitome of modern (217). She ridicules these Iranians for aiming so low, for accepting the superficial aspect of modernity as good enough, and for taking these shallow social concessions as a suitable substitute for actual political progress—for real freedom. For Moaveni, Western consumerism is an understandable means for revolt, a defensible symbol of rebellion, but not a sufficient end. “Modern” defined this way is a tool, a tactic, but not a goal.

Moaveni frequently dwells on the relationship between Islamic law and whether it can ever be combined with a “modern” democracy, which she defines as a democratic state which upholds political dissidence, freedom of speech, and the rights of women (99). Though the Islamic Republic attempts to feign modernity with superficial gestures such as opening computer centers and baking giant sheet cakes, Moaveni rejects these acts and pokes fun at the clerics using CD ROMs. She decides, ultimately, that a “modern” Iranian democracy must be a secular Iranian democracy, saying “a devotion to a secular Iran ran through both sides of my family, and everything I had learned about religion and freedom convinced me secularism was the only way to safeguard people’s rights” (226). Secularism, unlike materialism, is both a means to an end and an end in itself; it is, in her mind, the one most important thing capable of moving Iran out of the Dark Ages and into the Modern.

The young people in Iran recognize this also, and it shows in their tendencies to ignore Islamic social customs and keep Islam “at arm’s length” whenever possible (97). They flout moral traditions and drink alcohol, have pre-marital sex, and wear clothing often deemed inappropriate. All of these departures from the Islamic norm are, again, acts of rebellion against a repressive government. The sexes are segregated and vices are controlled publicly, so people

revolt with house parties, private sexual encounters, or by simply taking beatings from the morality police in stride on the way to the next illicit activity. These acts are “modern”, in that they embody a thirst for personal liberties, for social permissiveness, for freedom from the contrived Islamic piety imposed on them by old-fashioned mullahs, for a secular Iran.

The yearning for an Iran free from religious dogma is reflected in the political attitudes of Moaveni and the Tehrani youth. They are angry at the revolutionary government and disillusioned with the reform movement, which they don't believe to be progressive or effective enough. During an interview with a reformist political candidate, Moaveni is offended when he treats her like a foreigner, and she counter-attacks in her mind by expressing the youth's contempt for politicians like him: “I wanted to say, no matter how modern and reformed and improved you appear to be, you with your tweed jacket and your spectacles, you will always be considered a thief. Iranians will never trust you because you—not the nation—are your own first priority” (106). Here, Moaveni states that although the reformist may appear modern through his contemporary dress and demeanor, he lacks the commitment to political progress that would truly make him modern. Though he may be a bit moderate compared to the hard-line mullahs, he is no friend of the rebellion. In fact, this leader is representative of reformist politicians as a group. “Modern” Iranians grudgingly support them as the lesser of two evils, but would never be caught referring to the reform movement as modern itself, as it never comes any closer to achieving the sweeping changes Moaveni's generation of Iranians so desperately craves.

“Modern”, in essence, is everything Iran would be if the youth were ever able to transform or overthrow the Islamic fundamentalist government. “Modern” is secular, socially permissive, trendy, and free. “Modern” is the liberty to wear the veil or not, the liberty to walk

down the street with your co-ed friends, the liberty to buy into Western trends without being assaulted. “Modern” Iran, for Moaveni, is an abstract ideal, not a place she can visit except in her thoughts, or in conversations with other disillusioned young Iranians. Modernity is the object of the struggle, the purpose of the Lipstick Jihad

#### Works Cited

Moaveni, Azadeh. *Lipstick Jihad*. New York: Public Affairs, 2005. Print.