

Bread: Performance of Identity, Gender and Belief

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From the Middle East in Neolithic times to Europe in the twenty-first century, from Adam and Eve to the postmodern human, from Abraham and Lot to Elijah and Jesus, from the age of watermills to the Industrial Revolution, from the unleavened bread of the Babylonians to the luxury loaves of the North Americans, bread, in all its forms and throughout different slices of history and geography, has played a substantial role in people's lives. Its layers of meaning range from the satisfaction of hunger to the performance of religious ceremonies, and its influence ranges from revolutions to migrations, mirroring social, political, and cultural changes. From women to men, bread embodies identity and gender. From its smell to the taste, bread transports its passengers between the realms of reality and fantasy.

In this research note, I use three theoretical lenses to analyze bread's meanings: contextualism to explore its significance in different cultural and social contexts; Marxist/socialist theory to frame bread within social, political, and economic changes; and, finally, postmodernism to demonstrate that bread is the embodiment of different voices and bread-making creates space for its makers to perform their gender and identity. Here, in addition to published sources, I build upon my own experiences as an Iranian Persian woman who has lived over twenty-six years in Iran and one year in Canada. In addition, I draw on three interviews that I conducted with Aparna, Zaman, and Mojtaba in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. Aparna is a Bengali woman from Mumbai, India. Zaman is a Panjabi man from Lahore, Pakistan, and Mojtaba is a Persian man from Khorasan, Iran. Both Aparna and Zaman are PhD students at Memorial University of Newfoundland while Mojtaba is a mechanical engineer, working in St. John's. Zaman, Mojtaba and I are Muslims, and Aparna is Hindu. Zaman bakes *Naan*, leavened oven-baked flatbread, almost every night and different kinds of *Paratha* occasionally for Eids (Muslim festivals) and parties. Aparna bakes *Aloo ka Paratha* whenever she misses its taste and *Phulka*, Indian Puffed flat bread, for religious rituals. Mojtaba makes one new kind of bread which is the mixture of *Tāftoon*, Persian leavened flour bread, and another kind of Persian bread, *Lavāsh*, soft, thin flatbread, every weekend.

Bread: The Intersection of Culture, Society, and Food

As Mary Hufford defines it, "context is a frame of reference created in order to constitute and interpret an object of attention" (Hufford 2003:146). As products of an artistic process that are, as Richard Bauman argues, "situated in a web of interrelationships" (Bauman 1983:362), folklore objects have symbolic significance reaching far beyond the explicit content of their texts (Ben-Amos 1971:11). Context is the interpretant of folklore, and the meaning and significance of folklore objects are context-dependent (Ben-Amos 1993:212). Events are those contexts in which people perform folklore in their society (Ben-Amos 1993:219). Hence, according to Dan Ben-Amos, "contextual analysis does not explain folklore; it interprets it, seeking meaning rather than causes" (1993:210). The transference of any folklore text to a different historical, cultural context grants it a new meaning. As Ben-Amos

believes, “Because of their transient nature, folklore texts do not have single meaning” (1993:212). Therefore, bread as an object of folklore is polysemic, symbolizing various meanings in different cultures.

Through the application of contextualism, symbolic meanings of bread are revealed in the different contexts of its existence and events of its performance. To this end, based on Bauman’s (1983) six-way schema for understanding context, in the next few pages I explore bread in two different contexts: cultural and social. Within a cultural context, I first examine bread in a “context of meaning” (Bauman 1983:363), providing information about bread in several cultures and communities. Second, I explore it in an “institutional context” (Bauman 1983:364), considering these questions: How does bread relate to other aspects of cultural life to make up a larger interrelated configuration? Where does bread fit within the culture and how does it function? Finally, I investigate bread in a “context of communicative system” (Bauman 1983:364), demonstrating its relation to other folklore genres. In addition to its cultural context, I discuss the social context of bread. I address the “individual context” (Bauman 1983:365) as I take up the question: how does bread fit into a person’s life?

Bread, is a worldwide staple which anthropologist Carole Counihan describes as “the nexus of economic, political, aesthetic, social, symbolic and health concerns” (Counihan 1999; 29) in many countries. For example, in the North of Scotland in the nineteenth century, people looked with much reverence on bread. To trample it under foot or cast the smallest quantity into fire was regarded as nearly criminal. Children were trained by parents to avoid the abuse of bread in every way and to look upon it as God’s gift (Gregor 1889:198). In Congleton, England, bread is still believed by some to have religious importance. The church annually provides harvest feasts to celebrate the safe gathering of the harvest. The first loaf made from the last wheat to be gathered from the harvest is thought to have healing powers, so everyone in the festival is given one piece (Marchant, Reuben and Alcock 2008:37). In Sardinia, and all over Italy and Mediterranean Europe, bread has always been the *sine qua non*, absolutely indispensable or essential, of food. Minimal wellbeing was expressed in words “at least we have bread” (Counihan 1999:29).

In Ancien Regime France before the revolution, bread was synonymous with life. As historian Steven Lurance Kaplan asserts “[t]he bulk of the people believe that they are dying of hunger if they do not have bread [...] It was the healthiest of all foods [...] The most essential to life” (1997:1). The loaf of bread contained something more than calories and nutrients. Bread was associated with cleverness, wisdom, home, family, love, pleasure, fortune and liberty (Kaplan 1997:3). All these connotations have come into French oral genres as well; a wonderful man or woman is “better than good bread,” an ill person has lost “the taste for bread,” an individual who has already enjoyed many years of life “has already baked more than half of his bread,” a person who arouses vain hopes, “promises more butter than bread” and there are many other examples (Kaplan 1997:3, 4). However, at the same time, according to Kaplan, there were some exceptional French thinkers, such as Simon Linguet, who called bread “this cruel dependence,” (1997:5) “promising more than it could deliver, manipulating emotions and only partially nourishing bodies, undependable and inconstant yet jealous and demanding undivided commitment” (1997:7).

According to folklorist Diane Tye, in Newfoundland, by the twentieth century, bread had become the keystone of family food system (Tye 2011:177). In some communities people believed that bread provided protection from the fairies; children were given “bread for road” and “company bread” to ensure their safe return home while adults carried bread crusts in their pockets when “in the woods, picking berries, in fog, at night, or when passing a graveyard” (Tye 2011:187).

As I have learnt from Zaman, in Pakistan, the main dish of 80% of Panjabis is bread rather than rice. Both in urban and rural areas, women bake bread at home at least once a day. Especially in the morning, you can distinguish houses of Panjabi family from others according to the pleasant smell of Aloo Paratha. According to Aparna, in India, the main dish of Bengali people is rice but bread is the side dish of every meal. Whether in a big city like Delhi, Mumbai or Kolkata, or in rural areas, on every typical day, women make at least one kind of bread, known as *Roti* at home. While Roti can be purchased from bakeries, doing so does not reflect well upon the reputation of the woman and her family. Once a year, during the big festival of *Durga Puja*, every Hindu makes a special dish which includes one particular type of bread, Phulka, for the mother Goddess, *Durga*. They call this religious act of giving God food *Po*. Making Phulka for Goddess Durga is a very special ceremony. First, worshipers must be clean, pure from any dirt. Women are forbidden to make it while they are menstruating. When making this holy bread, they have to use different utensils and ingredients rather than the ones for their daily usage. Then, when the bread is prepared, they put it in front of Durga and pray. Finally, they eat and share the holy bread with others. In other festivals and other religious gatherings among Hindus, like Diwali, people make Phulka as well but this time for themselves not for Gods or Goddesses.

In Afghanistan, the common word among Dari speakers for meal is *Nān* meaning bread. Among Muslims, bread is known as *Baraka* meaning God’s gift or blessing (Shirazi 2005, 293). Because of the holy place of bread in the Iranian culture, Iranians, whether Zoroastrians or Muslims, treat bread very cautiously. First, they are very careful not to waste any piece of it, and not to step on it. Also it is advisable not to throw away bread with other trash; as a result, in many Iranian houses, there is a separate garbage bag for bread. When I was a child, I remember my grandmother had a tablecloth especially reserved for eating bread on and she asked my sister and me to try not to throw away any bread crusts or crumbs. At the end of a week, she shook out the tablecloth in the yard for pigeons while saying: “if you share your bread with others, God gives you more blessings”.

Bread also plays a very special role in Iranian oral narratives. One famous example is the very common belief among Iranians that if they break a promise or vow, bread as Baraka or God’s blessing, will depart from their table. Therefore, when they want to give a firm promise, they swear by bread and salt and say: “be haghe ān nān va namaki ke bā ham khordim” meaning “swear to the salt and bread we ate together.”

There is a famous legend about bread among rural people from the northeastern Iranian province of Khorasan. On the first day of Nowruz, Iranian New Year, Khorasanis bake a special type of bread in an earthen oven or *Tanūr*. They try to keep the Tanūr warm throughout the evening because they

believe *Bibi Khur* will visit their house. They put the leftovers of their last meal and the bread in the warm *Tanūr*. When *Bibi Khur* sees the warm food and the bread in the oven, she will pray for the family and ask God to give them more *Baraka*, bread, during the New Year (Shirazi 2005:303).

In addition to oral narratives, the footprint of bread is traceable in other folklore genres in Iran. Some Iranian Shi'i Muslim women perform special religious ceremonies around certain foods including bread. To pay tribute to dead holy figures and get help from them, women set a table, called *Sofreh*, on which they put different foods. Depending on the kind of *Sofreh*, they select different types of bread. In some rural parts, they themselves make the bread but in other places they usually buy it. After praying and blowing holy words into the foods, they eat the bread and other foods while making wishes. They believe that after prayer, the food acquires supernatural powers because it is blessed by the holy figure to whom the *Sofreh* is dedicated.



Photo 1: Zaman making Aloo Paratha with his friends for a party while giving me the recipe. “The first step is making, kneading, and rolling the dough.”



Photo 2: "For the next step, stuff one layer of boiled spiced potatoes between one layer of the rolled dough on top and one on the bottom. Don't forget to prepare the filling ahead of time."



Photo 3: "Press tightly a three-layered bread to give you a whole entity. You are almost there!"



Photo 4: "Fry both sides of bread on a greased pan for about two minutes."



Photo 5: "When it becomes golden brown, your Aloo Paratha is ready! It is usually served with unsalted butter spread on top, but you can have it with yogurt too!"

Hegemonic and Counterhegemonic Bread

According to Gramsci, the absence of socialist revolutions in capitalist democracies is because of hegemony; a dominant class does not just rule a society but leads it through the exercise of intellectual and moral leadership and the unification of the whole society by presenting, as cultural studies scholar John Storey says, “its own particular interests as the general interests” (2008:80). According to Storey, “Hegemony is never simply imposed from the above: it is always the result of negotiations between dominant and subordinate group” (2008:81). Folklore actively contests the hegemony of dominant social orders in two ways. First, folklore as a counterhegemonic activity has the capacity for direct contestation. Second, it can indirectly limit the total hegemony of parallel products and behaviors emanating from the dominant social order (Limon 1983:45, 46). Through applying Marxist theory and Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, bread in its different forms can be investigated in relation to the dominant power structures. Throughout history and time, bread sometimes has been like the right-hand man of hegemony, but on the contrary, it sometimes also has been an advocate of subordinate groups and directly or indirectly contested hegemonic power. Because of this, bread can narrate history like a sensitive historian, highlighting the social and economic changes in different societies. Drawing on sociologist Marcel Mauss’s (1954) Marxist framework, Diane Tye indicates that bread in Newfoundland, as in some other cultures, acts like a total social fact. A study of bread’s production, consumption and distribution reveals social, political and economic meanings (2011:189).

Mass produced Bread on the Side of Cultural Hegemony

Socialist theorists such as Marx, Engels and Gramsci believed that “human nature is the product of history and society,” and in this way “individualism is created by the production system of the capitalist economy” (quoted in Counihan 1999: 25, 26). Counihan, in her book *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning and Power* (1999), identifies the role of bread in the construction of individualism in the peasant society of Sardinia, Italy. As she argues, “in the subsistence wheat and bread production, men and women depend on each other for assistance and are unable to make a living without mutual exchange of labor and products. Social interdependence declines with the concentration of wheat production on capital-intensive farms and of bread production in a few bakeries operating with wage laborers to make profits” (Counihan 1999:41-42). Counihan believes bread, in its three stages of production, distribution, and consumption, helped the hegemonic power of modernization and industrialization shift the Sardinian society toward individualism and independence.

Another example of hegemony’s link to bread can be found in the history of revolutions. In the article “Breadways,” Kaplan (1997) compares the powerful role of bread in Ancient Regime France with the Revolution and shows how bread governed private and public life in both epochs. He argues that although the difference in breadways helped the old regime construct distinctions within the French society, the Revolution’s main goal was, at least theoretically, to reunite people by challenging their past model of daily nourishment. To this end, the revolutionaries tried to change hierarchical models of consumption through the replacement of “pain de ménage,” homemade bread, with the mass

production of “common bread” or as it was called at that time, “bread of the people.” This linked poor and rich in their breadways (Kaplan 1997:20). However, this hegemonic force with the aim of the unification of people’s taste was not beneficial for the Parisian bakers and bread makers (Kaplan 1997:21).

Ethnic Bread as a Resistance Force against Hegemonic Taste

In contrast to the production of mass produced bread, men and women can challenge the social order and cultural hegemony by making homemade bread. Ethnic bread offers a third modality of opposition which is strengthening the internal cohesion of a group and thereby maximizing its solidarity and survival against a dominant social order (Limon 1983:47). In this section, I show how making ethnic bread helps immigrants as a subordinate class in the context of a new country like Canada struggle against the dominant interests of hegemony in breadways.

As folklorist Susan Kalčík argues, “the earliest-formed layers of culture, such as foodways, are the last to erode” (Kalčík 1984:39). When people enter into a new country, they react to food shock in three different ways: they might maintain their traditional foodways, trying to find and eat foods as similar to those in the old country or they accept the new ways and replace it with their old food habits. Both processes ease the adjustment to life in a new country. The continuation of the old lifestyle makes the break less abrupt, while the replacement with new alternatives speeds acculturation (Kalčík 1984). However, the third way is in-between, the hybridization of old and new foodways leading to construct “creolized” identity. Creolization is one kind of identity formation which, according to diaspora scholar Robin Cohen, “centers on the cross-fertilization between different cultures as they interact” (2010:71). As she explains, “when creolization occurs, participants select particular elements from incoming or inherited culture, endow these with meanings different from those they possessed in the original culture, and then creatively merge these to create totally new verities that supersede the prior forms” (Cohen 2010:71). This phenomenon happens in different forms of culture such as food, music and dance (Cohen 2010:71). Therefore, in the context of a new country, “creolized foodways” come about when immigrants make compromises between and hybrid their desire for old food habits and the new ones of their new country.

Considering these three kinds of food adjustments, the breadways of Aparna, Zaman, and Mojtaba fit into the last category, the creolization between the old and the new. They adjust their familiar traditional ways of bread making with new ingredients, they substitute the special wheat flour with all-purpose flour, and they find new ways to use new tools such as an electrical stove rather than gas stove or underground oven. Mojtaba told me he cannot find anything similar to the Iranian bread he grew up with, so he has to make his bread. Conversely, both Aparna and Zaman told me they can find different kinds of Paratha (Aloo, Chicken, Palaka, Muli and Sabzi), Naan or any other kinds of their ethnic bread here in stores, such as Costco, Sobeys and Taste East. That said, they still prefer to make bread at home. Explaining her reasons, Aparna says:

Making my own bread of any kind [is more] healthy. If you take them from the store they are frozen for *many* years! Some chemical has been added in it. They ship it from India, Pakistan and anywhere. How they are going to ship it? [...] Even if they are making them in Canada and the U.S in the store or anywhere, they still add some additions because they are going to make profit [...]. The main thing is to get profit. [...] If you eat different brands of Paratha in the store, the taste is totally the same. Every bread has its own taste but all [are] the same. No change. There is something missing. But when I'm making it, if I'm making bread, the taste would be little different. If you get it one particular brand from the store, it will be remaining the same. There is no change, no variety. Nothing. They will be the same because they are in the same amount, the same additives, exactly the same weight. But we don't do it that way. Because we try to experience [...] if I want to eat spicy Paratha, I add more chili or if I want it salty, I add salt.

Zaman also asserts:

Most of my friends [Pakistani] prepare their bread at home. It's a part of their meals, regular meals. [...] Because first they find it very cheaper, second thing is that they can prepare their own bread of their own requirement. [It is] because of taste, especially if you buy it from the outside, from the market, you cannot add the requirements of your own. Some people like to have butter instead of oil. It gives you much better taste. So if you buy it from the outside, you cannot add such kind of things. Adding different varieties to bread, it forced them to prepare it at home.

As both Aparna and Zaman mentioned, in Canada, unlike in India or Pakistan, there is no store or bakery for selling Paratha. Therefore, everybody has to make it at home in the oven or by using a "Paratha maker" machine. Aparna believes that each time it is made, Paratha in India tastes different, and as Zaman says, "you never get bored [...] with bread."

According to Marxist theorists, from the classic to postmodern, homogeneity and predictability are the main features of products of mass culture in a capitalist society (Storey 2008:62). In Adorno's language, capitalist popular culture, popular music for instance, is "standardized" in all its features (Storey 2008:65). In Jameson's words, all multinational capitalist cultural products, such as nostalgia film, are "pastiche," a blank parody and quotation of previous culture (Storey 2008:191, 192). Postmodernism as the epoch of late capitalism, in Baudrillard's term, is the era of "simulation" and "hyperrealism," a real without origins or reality (Storey 2008:187). Although none of the Marxist theorists refer to the capitalist food industry explicitly, their concepts are applicable to food products as well.

In the above mentioned case, ethnic bread made by immigrants in a new country proves that Adorno's notion of standardization, Jameson's idea of pastiche and the Frankfurt School's notion of sampling are not limited to pop music or nostalgia films. Sampling can happen with any products of mass culture even foods such as bread. According to my Pakistani and Indian informants, mass produced Paratha lacks the "authentic" taste of its Indian-Bengali-Pakistani original. The commodification and

commercialization of Paratha and Naan devalues homemade versions of them, making them too accessible by turning it into another salable commodity in the capitalist society of Canada.

Using Gramsci's concept of hegemony as the "exploitative and oppressive nature of capitalism" (Storey 2008:79), bread, in this context, is "a total social fact" which unveils the "black parody" or "empty copy" of the hyperrealist nature of capitalism. The hegemonic taste of mass produced Paratha has been challenged by Zaman and Aparna who are not yet *tastebind*, becoming accustomed to a single taste to the exclusion of others. However, beyond struggling against hegemonic taste, the acts of bread-making and eating represent more meanings in terms of gender and identity which are best captured through the lens of postmodernism.

Making Bread, Making Their Own World

As Kalčík asserts, "traditional foods and ways of eating form a link with the past and help ease the shock of entering a new culture, thus many struggle to hold on them despite pressure to change" (Kalčík 1984:37). Anthropologist David Sutton introduces the idea of food as a cultural site through which people "reintegrate the past and the present to recapture the totality of the old way of life" (2001:75). Through studying Greek immigrants in the U.S and the U.K, he shows that they grab the power of smell and taste of ethnic foods as "a firm ground under their feet" that "evoke the memories on which identities are formed" (Sutton 2001:74). He writes: "in the migrant context...cooking is not simply an everyday practice, but an attempt to reconstruct and remember synthetically, to return to that whole world of home, which is subjectively experienced both locally and nationally, if not at other levels as well" (86). Taking the same approach, Diane Tye demonstrates that for many Newfoundlanders "homemade bread is a vehicle for imaginary travel across space as well as time." Its taste and smell evoke the past, childhood and rural way of life which does not exist anymore, thus leading to individual and cultural reaction to loss (2011:189). In addition, some diaspora studies in the U.S, such as Dike's exploration of Moroccan identities through food in Boston (2014) and Galvin and Hauck-Lawson's survey of ethnic bakeries in Brooklyn (1991), reassert that in a foreign country, cooking and eating any traditional food associated with home, including bread, helps immigrants connect with their ethnic identities.

My consultants reinforce the findings of this published research. Aparna, Zaman and Mojtaba all associate food with their family in particular and with their identity in general.

Aparna: When I'm eating my own [home-made] Aloo ka Paratha, I felt my mother made it for me. Whenever I make something I can feel the amazing taste of the special Paratha my father made for us. [...] I can feel it now. I always miss it.

Mojtaba: It is very nostalgic. When I'm making the dough [for *Tāftoon*], the smell of wheat brings me back to Iran's bakeries where every morning I used to stand in the line to get bread. [...] While I flip over the bread on the pan, its smell reminds me of the bread which just came out of the baker's Tanūr [in Iranian bakeries].

Zaman: When I'm making bread, I remember my mother many times.

One of my Iranian friends who established an Iranian bakery in St. John's, once, in an informal conversation, explained his motivation for starting this business:

I love the moment when I take the bread out from the oven and touch it. I used to eat hot bread every morning in Iran. I used to touch bread every morning. You know how meaningful it is for us [Iranians] to eat "hot bread which just came out of the oven" for our breakfast.

All these quotes show how bread evokes the memory of the senses and helps its makers return to worlds displaced in time and space. When they make their own bread, they are creating their own imaginary and interior world in which their feelings are sheltered and their memories are relived. They are reunited with their roots and the motherland they left behind. As a souvenir from this journey, they bring bread back to the real world in order to make their cultural loss tangible.

Reconstruction of Identity and Cross-Group Cohesion through Bread Making

The notion of identity refers to the concept of a widely-shared individual and social existence leading to a process of affiliation with a community while acting as a confining construct when referring to others (Abrahams 2003:208, 209). However, based on Roland Cohen's "situational identity" theory (Cohen 1978), identity is not fixed, but rather is situated, fluid, and constantly changing. It is reconstructed under different social interactions and conditions over time. The role of food and foodways in the formation of identity as self-perception and other-exclusion is undeniable. Foodways as a marker of identity, in anthropologist Claude Fischler's words "is a quite central component of the sense of collective belonging" (1988:280) and the self because "human beings mark their membership of a culture or a group by asserting the specificity of what they eat, or more precisely [...] by defining the otherness, the difference of others" (Fischler 1988:280). Likewise for immigrants, as Kalčík explains, the use of certain foods in a group becomes a symbol, creating a feeling of group belongingness and community integration. Such symbolic foodways strengthen the group's internal tie or indicate out-group status (Kalčík 1984: 47, 48). In the same vein, Anne Kaplan in her book *The Minnesota Ethnic Food* suggests that "foodways, identity and one's chosen past are all tied together and given an urgency and new meaning by multiethnic, multicultural environment in which individual currently live" (1986:154).

The notion of identity is very clear for Mojtaba. He makes bread for his Iranian wife, his Iranian friends, and sometimes his non-Iranian friends. He calls his bread "100% Iranian." When I was talking to him, he insisted many times, that "you know it better than me, we, just the Iranians, know how much we miss Tāftoon, Lavāsh and Sangak-all different types of Iranian bread- here." Undoubtedly, for him, bread brings sense of unity with his family and other members of the Iranian community in St. John's. Also for me, as an Iranian student living in Canada, bread is always connected with memories of my family and country. These following lines are selected from my diaries:

Whenever I wake up in the morning, I realize all was a sweat dream; I'm no longer in Iran [...]. There is no family here waiting around the breakfast table for me [...]. There is no father here going to the bakery every morning to get hot Sangak for breakfast [...]. I miss going to *Tajrish* having *Ash-e- Reshte* and *Barbari* with my friends [...] I am missing Iran every minute.

On the contrary, defining identity gets very complicated for my Pakistani and Indian consultants. Zaman bakes bread with his Pakistani friends and sometimes shares it with them and also his non-Pakistani friends. On some special occasions, such as Eids he makes more loaves and brings them to the parties. He explains:

Especially the food which we have in Pakistani Panjab is the same as Indian Panjab. Before 1947, actually India and Pakistan were the same countries. In 1947, they broke down. Unfortunately, Panjab was the province which was divided in two parts. One part was in India and the other part in Pakistan. But still all the traditions, customs are the same, specially wedding ceremonies.

When I asked “so what is your bread, is it Panjabi or Pakistani?” he hesitated before answering: “It is both. Panjab and Pakistan are the same.”

Aparna described her best experience of making Aloo ka Paratha here in Canada with the help of one of her Pakistani friends. She also mentioned that one day, she taught a Pakistani-Canadian friend how to make Paratha. When I asked her the same question, is it Pakistani or Indian or Bengali bread, she told me:

No no no, bread is exception. You might see even in India the same foods are being made very differently in different regions but bread is not like that. It is the same bread, the same Aloo ka paratha, the same Roti, the same Luchi in Pakistan, India and also Bangladesh. [...] That's sad, that's very bad because as I said religion is the one. I don't know why they fight why we fight

The other approach in food and foodways studies is the exploration of its role in the “intercultural negotiations and the workings of cultural and geographical appropriation” rather than just differentiating people by constructing different identities (Turgeon and Pastinelli 2002:250). Through making, eating and sharing the same Aloo Paratha, Zaman and Aparna cross political boundaries and break down social distinctions. Despite ongoing conflicts between Pakistan and India, bread provides a channel for communication and helps Zaman, Aparna and her Pakistani friends underline their historical cultural unity. Bread equips them with one common language through which these politically different but culturally similar nations negotiate. As if by ingesting their bread, they symbolically abolish their old history of hostility. In this way, the notion of identity, according to Abrahams, becomes synonymous with a Bengali-Pakistani-Indian group developing a greater sense of common history and set of cultural practices (2003:202).

Even though Aloo Paratha reunites Pakistan and India or maybe Bangladesh, it excludes others. To be desirable Indian-Pakistani-Bengali bread, more hot spices are necessary. Neither I nor my French friend could eat it without yogurt. In this way, this bread acts as a *shibboleth* (Noyes 2003:25) marking off India, Pakistan and Bangladesh from the world and differentiating the outsiders because of their failure to tolerate its taste.

Bread as a Means of Self-Construction and Performance of Individualism

The daily handling of food in its different stages (shopping, preparing and eating) is an opportunity to show one's intelligence, skill, innovation and personal signature (Sutton 2001:21,129). Therefore, eating and making ethnic food is not only the performance of group identity, but it also becomes a means of self-statement and a marker of individualism (Kalčík 1984:54).

When I asked Mojtaba how he made Tāftoon without having Tanūr here, he explained the new system he designed for controlling heat. He told me by combining two different ways of making Tāftoon and Lavāsh, he invented a new kind of bread which is neither of them. He says: "You cannot say it is Lavāsh or Tāftoon, it is my own discovery!"

While baking bread, Aparna's strong feeling for her father, Zaman's constant picture of his mother, and Mojtaba's remembrance of nostalgic smell of Iranian's bakeries all bear testimony to the fact that not only eating but also cooking is a highly emotionally charged activity which has a strong tie to the past. The plural expression of different identities through bread making echoes the postmodern notion of multiple voices. Considering food as mobile, multivocal, and polysemic (Turgeon and Pastinelli 2002:250), different kinds of bread are the embodiment of multiple voices. They are tangible signatures of diverse identities. They are talking out loud of their makers' desires, needs, losses and hopes. They are the means of expressing cultural belongings and self-innovation. Despite political fragmentations, they are representing cultural cohesions between nations. Finally, they are drawing distinctive lines between different tastes.

Bread, Performance of Gender

In addition to its strong tie to the past and identity, bread making can also be an example of gender performativity. In earlier generations in Newfoundland, as Tye explains, bread making was "a measure of successful womanhood" and women were judged by their ability to make bread. Bread making was a rite of passage for girls; when they were able to make good bread, it conveyed they became marriageable women (Tye 2011:184).

Moreover, bread making can create a safe space for women to perform femininity. According to Counihan's essay on bread (1999) in Sardina, Italy, women regularly made bread together. As Counihan argues, "the bread makers were typical channels of social communication. While they prepared the

dough and baked the bread, they make an X-ray of the town. Secrets were revealed; the women judged and absolved or condemned. By working together, women developed and acted out standards for 'good bread, 'good work' and finally a 'good woman.' Through the act of criticizing others, they collectively reaffirmed local norms and morality" (1999:34, 35).

Also in Iran, as mentioned earlier, bread making is a central part of a religious ritual, *Sofreh*, which helps Shi'i women perform femininity. As Faegheh Shirazi, a historian and scholar of Middle Eastern Studies argues, *Sofreh*, held by women for other women, serves to unify the women offering both comfort and community and is an important part of Iranian women's spirituality (2005:309).

According to Aparna and Zaman, making bread is part of the daily work of Indian and Pakistani women. From the age of eight or nine, every interested Panjabi and Bengali girl starts learning how to make bread from their mothers, so when they reach 21 or 22 years old, they have become professional bread makers. It is worth mentioning that bread making in these nonwestern societies is not always an indicator of the imposition of patriarchal power over women who are obliged to do this chore. Rather, as Aparna and Zaman insist, more often than not, women enjoy this daily activity and, if they need aid, it is their husbands' and sons' duty to help or even do the job completely. Furthermore, if a Bengali or Panjabi girl has no desire to make bread at all, she is not forced by anyone to learn it.

Despite all these female spaces, bread making is not a female-specific activity. In terms of occupation, most bread bakers in Pakistan, Iran and India are men. Furthermore, neither Zaman nor Mojtaba had tried to make bread back home in Pakistan and Iran. Zaman started making bread since he went to the U.K to study, and Mojtaba made bread for the first time in Canada. Since then, Zaman has begun to make bread every day, trying not to buy it from the store. When I asked him if, in the future, he gets married to a Pakistani girl, he will still keep making bread every day, his answer was: "Yes, of course. Why not? I will enjoy baking bread for my wife." Even though he grew up in a family where every day his mother baked Roti and Naan, he does not label bread making as a solely feminine task.

Conclusion

By using the approaches of contextualism, postmodernism and Marxist/socialist theory, I have explored various aspects of bread. I have tried to fit these various interpretations together like different parts of a puzzle and to join them together to make one single coherent picture. While overlapping with each other, each of these theories highlights some facts about bread more than the others. Providing different frameworks, contextualism is an indispensable part of studying folklore. Every meaning of bread as a folklore text has to be interpreted in relation to its cultural and social context. One slice of bread in one culture might mean blessing from God while the same slice is a special gift for Goddess in other culture. For one family, bread brings a message of liberty while in the neighbors' house it is synonymous with cruel dependency. Looking through a Marxist lens, bread's sociopolitical mask is stripped off and its relation to hegemonic discourse is unveiled. To be with or against dominant power, bread is either an advocate or opponent of subordinates. In the framework of Marxism, bread can re-

narrate history according to cultural, social and political changes occurred in its production, consumption and distribution. However, it is through postmodernism that bread and its relation to gender and identity is exposed. Bread is a means of performing diverse identities while providing a channel for intercultural negotiations. Whether women or men, immigrants represent their hopes, desires, losses and thoughts in the shape of bread and through its smell and taste, they travel across space and time to where they are reunited with their homeland.

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Notes

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² Abraham and Lot both were visited by angels, and they baked unleavened bread for their guests (Marchant, Reuben and Alcock 2008: 16, 17). Elijah was saved from starvation by the miraculous appearance of a cake, baked on the stones. For Jesus, bread was the means of demonstration of his divine nature when a few loaves were made sufficient to feed thousands (Waldenberger 1995:17).

³ In this context, Persian refers to the racial ethnicity, i.e. being Fars and different from other races such as Kurd, Turk, Lur, Turkmen and other ethnic groups living in Iran. It should not be confused with the broader connotation of Persian as the culture of people from Persia who constituted "Persianate world" including what is today called Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan extending to parts of north India, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, the Caucasus and Anatolia (Katouzian 2009:9).

⁴ 5Paratha or Pratha is unleavened flatbread that can be stuffed with some of these ingredients: boiled potatoes (Aloo Paratha or Aloo ka Paratha), chicken (Chicken

Paratha), spinach (Palak Paratha), horseradish/radish (Mooli Paratha) or vegetable (Sabzi Paratha).

⁵ The Persian speakers use the word Nān for bread in general. To avoid confusion with Naan, as another kind of bread discussed earlier, I use two different spellings.

⁶ Of course in addition to Zoroastrians and Muslims, there are people with other beliefs and religions who live in Iran. However, for the purpose of this paper, I, as a Muslim with Zoroastrian heritage am just focussing on my observations and experiences as well as those of my consultant, Mojtaba, who is also Muslim.

⁷ Her actual identity is unknown but according to people's belief, she is a highly respected spirit who is free to visit people on certain days of the year.

⁸ Mauss in his book, *The Gift* (1954), shows the importance of gifts in social relations in France. He concludes that the fragmentation of social relations in the French society at that time resulted from the increase in market exchange and the decline of gift giving. He coins the term "social total fact" and uses it for gift, the marker of social change.

⁹ - Mojtab says: "You know, we [Iranians] cannot find Tāftoon or Lavāsh or Sangak here. I don't like always to eat baguette. Actually I can't. I miss Iranian bread's taste, I have to make them."

¹⁰ Tajrish is the name of an old neighborhood in Tehran which is famous for its Bazar.

¹¹ Ash-e- Reshteh is an Iranian thick soup consisting of herbs, noodle and beans, and Barbari is one type of Iranian flatbread.