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Mothers in the Jewish Cultural Imagination

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THREE

Nene Mesl-e Nān—'Mother is Like Bread': The Perception of Motherhood and Folklore Expressions among the Jews of Afghanistan

TSILA ZAN-BAR TSUR

DURING MY CHILDHOOD in Israel, I lived with my grandmother and grandfather, Jews who had emigrated from Afghanistan. Every morning my grandmother baked bread and served it at the table, saying, *Nene mesl-e nān* ('Mother is like bread'). She often changed the order of the words, saying *Nān mesl-e nene* ('Bread is like mother'). Once she had served the bread, my grandmother would ask me to tell the bread my dreams from the night before. If they were pleasant dreams, we would partake in a ritual of washing our hands and eating the bread, after saying the traditional Hebrew blessing, *hamotsi leḥem min ha'arets* ('[Blessed are You, Lord our God], who brings forth bread from the earth'); if they were bad dreams, we would go out to the balcony, crumble the bread, and scatter it for the birds. My grandmother would then say: 'Oh birds, bless my granddaughter like this blessed, nourishing bread.'[1]

Later, I learned that Afghani Jews often declared 'Mother is like bread' as part of the longer proverb 'Mother is like bread, and Father is like meat' (Zan-Bar Tsur 2012: 300–1). This proverb raises questions about the cultural and linguistic implications of the analogies mother–bread and father–meat among Afghani Jews. In Afghani Jewish families, bread-making is delegated to the mother. I have also found evidence of this symbolic relationship between bread and motherhood in the rituals, customs, and narratives of Afghani Jewish folklore, suggesting that it expresses a distinctive world-view.

Over the course of ten years I conducted interviews among members of the Afghani community in Israel, especially those from Herat, including in-depth interviews with both women and men (at a ratio of three women to every man). I identified five key narrators among the women who were active in the Afghani Jewish community in Israel. All five spoke Hebrew and Dari, one of the two main

Figure 1 Afghan bread on display, 2010. *Photograph by Jan Chipchase; used under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 generic licence*

languages of Afghanistan, the other being Pashtu. Dari and Pashtu are usually written in Arabic script, but Jews write Dari using Hebrew script.[2] In their descriptions, the elderly informants, who had immigrated to Israel during the 1950s, recounted memories of a culture in Afghanistan that had thrived during the 1920s and 1930s. The women were aware of discontinuities in the cultural context for women of Afghani background in Israel, and this perception of difference shaped their focus on the features of their culture that had not survived. These features had defined their distinctiveness not only as Jews from other lands but also among other Afghani groups. One significant cultural feature, for instance, is that women in Afghanistan lived in communal settings in which several families were under the same patriarchal authority (see Irigaray 2004: 28–35).[3] This social organization provided the basis for the definition of womanhood in a way that related directly to a woman's ability to be a mother.

Definition of a Woman as a Fertile Being

Afghani Jews defined a woman according to her stages of development and associated these stages with her femininity. Until her first menstruation, a girl was

called *dokhtar*, meaning 'girl'. Once she began menstruating, she was called *zan shod*, meaning '[she] became a woman'. From that moment and until menopause, she was known as *zan*, 'woman'. When she was no longer fertile, she was referred to as *khoshk shod*, meaning 'dried-up', or *mard*, meaning 'man', or *sar gozasht*, 'the wise woman'. These variations in naming according to a woman's changing biological status were expressed in the community's cultural practices, including its rites of passage, food and cooking, and folk tales.

As food was an integral part of Jewish ceremonial life in Afghanistan, the different stages in a woman's life gained social legitimacy through female food rituals. Afghani Jews marked rites of passage with special ceremonies, food prepared especially for these occasions, and legends and fables told about women, reflecting various aspects of their femininity. The fact that the preparation of food was in the hands of women suggests that Afghani Jews viewed nourishment in a broad sense as the province of women, specifically mothers. One well-established ritual was the 'red stew' ceremony performed in celebration of an adolescent girl's first period. The women of the community cooked a stew made of red lentils, sliced beets, and pomegranate juice. Her grandmother fed it to her, signalling that she was now a fertile woman. She was then subjected to three tests during the ritual —for patience, wisdom, and courage. The test of patience involved untangling a ball of different-coloured threads: this metaphorically indicated whether the girl had the patience necessary to raise a family. In the test of wisdom, the older women would begin telling her a folk tale, and she provided an ending to the story which solved the conflict raised in the narrative. This was considered a reflection of the girl's resourcefulness and the wisdom with which she would approach life's challenges. In the test of courage, adults led the girl to the entrance of a cavern and told her to go in and bring water to an old woman who was waiting at the bottom. The test determined whether the youngster had the determination and courage to descend the dark steps and pathway leading to the old lady. Girls who passed these three tests were declared ready for matchmaking and, subsequently, marriage.

Another rite of passage, the 'white stew' ritual, was reserved for older women going through menopause. The woman received a cooked dish of white rice, almond milk, sugar, and rose water. She was then granted the right to fulfil an important role in the community such as that of midwife, healer, counsellor in life matters, bath attendant, or mourner. Such rituals reinforced the hierarchical organization of Jewish society in Afghanistan (Zan-Bar Tsur 2012: 311-23). Fertility provided the basis for the hierarchy among Jewish women and their status in Jewish society overall. An elderly woman was equal to an elderly man, and superior, in descending hierarchical order, to: a woman who gave birth to male babies; a woman who gave birth to female babies; a widow; a newly married woman; a barren woman; and an unmarried woman. In response to this hierarchy, women formed bonds of support, both in the family and more widely in

the community. These alliances provided a sense of order; they also existed among men, who were grouped according to their class and the social roles they fulfilled.

If the status of a woman depended upon her fertility, motherhood was also the source of her subjugation as she was required to reproduce and perpetuate the group (Chodorow 1978; Rich 1976). Thus one has to consider the particular and complex conceptualization of the term ‘power’ in Afghani Jewish society: the power of a woman’s fertility, being inherent in the female body, was different from the rhetorical and authoritative power granted to a mature woman, which was directed outside her body towards the community where she ultimately became a leader as soon as her reproductive ability ended.

Patriarchal forces governed women who could become mothers and raise children. Indeed, Jewish society in Afghanistan, like Afghani Muslim society, was patriarchal; authority was in the hands of the mature men of the community. When a young woman married, she moved directly to her husband’s home. This patrilinear pattern meant that the inheritance of wealth and possessions passed directly from father to son (women were not involved in matters of property). But when they could no longer give birth, women assumed powers that accentuated their wisdom and their ability to serve as active members of Afghani Jewish society. They were practitioners of folk medicine by virtue of the healing powers attributed to them as mothers, and they attended to matters related to informal education. Afghani Jews therefore considered the mother especially powerful in the community in her post-fertile period.

Bread as a Key Symbol in the Concept of Motherhood

Bread played a symbolic role in the rituals which marked the different phases of the human life-cycle in Afghanistan. It sanctified the rituals of birth and death, initiation, henna ceremonies, and weddings. It was also the main ingredient in festivals and special feasts, and in fertility and thanksgiving ceremonies. Families appeased good and evil spirits with bread and used it to send messages to each other. Other Central Asian ethnic groups use bread to express gender symbolism, but the Jews lay particular stress on its links to motherhood. The women I interviewed showed a profound familiarity with the feminine code expressed in unbaked dough. Examples were evident in the sayings they used, such as:

Vakhti khemir mikonam—dard-e del-em-o migam
‘While I knead dough—I am expressing my heartaches.’

Hame dard-e del man dāram be-khemir mikonam
‘I am kneading all of the secrets of my heart into the dough.’

In the second example above, there is a direct association between the word

'secret' and the term women used to express their heartaches—*dard-e del*. In their view, the dough had the power to incorporate emotions, specifically those of the mother kneading it. The dough hid a mother's secrets, wishes, longings, prayers, thanksgivings, sexual yearnings, and subversive messages. Such sayings granted bread the ability to affect the stomach and the very physical and emotional core of those consuming it. All sustenance could be derived from bread, and it 'ate' its way into a range of emotions and qualities that the baker herself had as a mother.

Jewish women, usually mothers, baked bread on Mondays and Thursdays. They baked ordinary bread early in the day before the morning prayers. On these days they observed a vow of silence while baking. Baking bread was allocated to pious women and mothers who were accustomed to giving to charity. It was also the case that many of the women who baked bread were poor and were hired to bake bread in other people's courtyards in exchange for money or food. During the 1930s and 1940s the wage for baking bread at people's homes was two *qeran* per loaf. When a woman baked more than seven loaves, the baker could barter for food, such as grain, tea, and sugar.

In the Afghani Jewish symbolic system, the mother is likened to bread. The well-known Afghan idiom 'Without bread there is no life' (*Bi nān zendegi nist*) suggests that for Afghani Jews there was no life without the mother, both in the biological sense of giving birth and in the sense of nurturing and feeding the family by means of physical and spiritual food. In contrast, the saying 'Father is like meat' is based on the fact that meat was a luxury and eaten mainly on the sabbath and festivals. The masculine connection to meat is also a result of the influence of the belief in contagious magic in surrounding cultures, according to which meat gave a man the masculine power of fertility and the ability to produce life. The Afghan father was not always at home, often only returning for special occasions and festivals. Afghan-born informant Shushan, whose mother had died prematurely, told me the following story about herself and her relation to bread:

Listen Tsila *jon* [beloved], I have a proverb for you. *Nene mesl-e nān—āghā mesl-e gush* ['Mother is likened to bread and father is likened to meat'], and that is the truth from my life. From the life I had in Afghanistan. We were a wealthy family in Kabul; we lived on Flowers Street. Our servants lived in the yard. We had a gardener, a cook, and a baker. My father used to travel to England with rugs. My father was an important merchant; he was never at home. Once that baker came and gave me the *nān*—the bread—hot from the oven. I did not eat it, and I closed my mouth like this [demonstrates]. I did not eat for many days and the poor thing cried and said to me: *Dokhtar, bokhor, bokhor* ['Girl, eat, eat']. She would crumble the bread into small pieces the size of pomegranate seeds and feed me like a baby bird and I . . . [ate] nothing. After a month my father returned and saw I was all bones . . . he cried and asked, *Cherā? Cherā?* ['Why? Why?']. I told him that I would only eat my mother's *nān*. Tsila *jon*, for the first time my father got down on his knees and cried over my mother: *Zan-e man cherā alām rafti?* ['My wife, why did you die?']. My heart also cried: *Nene, cherā alām rafti?* ['Mummy, why did you die?']. I remember this very well; it was during the Holiday of the Flowers [a name given to

Shavuot]. Afterwards my father took me to the backyard and brought *khemir* [dough] and asked me, '*Nene jon*, how did Mummy bake bread?' And I showed my father . . . I took the tablecloth and we started to bake the bread my mother used to make. Bread is mother. Bread is mother. Just as I told you: *Nene mesl-e nān* ['Mother is likened to bread'].[4]

Her narrative emphasizes that bread, a basic daily commodity which is filling and nourishing, is equated with a mother who takes care of her children. The bread illustrates the mother's crucial role in family life. Without this basic staple, the key to their sustenance, a family would not be nourished physically or nurtured spiritually and emotionally. At the same time, baking bread cultivated a mother's personhood and strengthened her connection to motherhood.

Types of Bread and Female-Mother Nicknames

In everyday speech, women equate mothers and bread. The similarity between the words *nene* for 'mother' and *nān* for 'bread' led to the use of terms for different types of bread as nicknames for mothers. Below is a list of types of bread and the corresponding nicknames that were common in the Afghani Jewish community:

1. *Nān-e tāve* ('fry-pan bread'): everyday bread baked in an elliptical shape and eaten daily, including *nān-e khoshk* ('dried bread') or *nān-e ojāq* ('toast'), which lasted for a long period and was baked from a mixture of wheat and chickpea flour. This was also the nickname given to an industrious mother.

2. *Nān-e shabāti* ('sabbath bread'): bread made of white flour baked for the sabbath and festivals. The baking of this bread enabled women to carry out the commandment of setting aside a portion of the dough (originally for the priests, as commanded in the Torah). This was the nickname given to mothers who were 'women of valour'.

3. *Nān-e domādi* ('groom's bread'): a long loaf of bread baked before a wedding which contained almonds, raisins, and pistachios.

4. *Nān-e zou* ('birthing mothers' bread'): bread baked with herbs known for their strengthening qualities.

5. *Nān-e avelut* ('mourning bread'): bread baked with a hard-boiled egg and given as a nickname to a mother who was despondent and sad.

6. *Nān-e arus* ('doll bread' or 'bride bread'): bread dolls baked especially for fertility and childbearing ceremonies. This was the nickname given to a mother who was as beautiful as a bride.

7. *Nān-e az mā behtarān* ('bread for our betters'—a term for demons): bread served as an offering to evil spirits. This nickname was given to a mother who could heal and knew how to exorcise devils and the evil eye.

8. *Nān-e gap mizanan* ('bread of speaking'): bread sent as a kind of culinary post to pass messages among family members. This nickname was given to mothers who were chatterboxes.
9. *Nān-e kheyrati* ('bread of charity'): bread given to dervishes and to the poor of the community. This nickname was given to mothers who frequently volunteered in the community.

In summary, Afghani Jewish women sorted bread into two functional categories: (*a*) bread baked as food for humans (sabbath bread, everyday bread, bread of charity), and (*b*) bread baked as food for spirits (bread dolls, bread for 'our betters' or demons). This perception of the situations in which bread plays a central role provided the context for the symbolic uses of bread in various beliefs and customs, thereby relating bread to good fortune.

Bread in Belief and Custom

In addition to being tasty and nourishing, bread represented a key to good fortune in Afghani culture: *Nān-o piyāz—pineh ke vāz* ('Bread and onion—open the door for good fortune'). In an interview, Berukha explained the association of bread with good fortune by saying that, 'If a person has bread and onion, then his luck is open. The door is the luck, and the key is the bread. You do not need more than that for luck in life. . . . Bread is mother, onion is simple food, that's what every person needs.' Berukha expounded on the belief by telling a story of a childhood experience:

> My mother was a baker in Herat. Every day she worked in other people's houses, baking bread for them. From working so much with ovens, she had no eyebrows because they had been singed by the fire. All day she was away and I raised my siblings. But in spite of our being poor, we always had bread that my mother baked. We used to eat bread with *chāy* [tea], bread with watermelon, bread with soup. Thus my little siblings' bellies were full with the bread that mother baked. Just as I told you, my mother was not always at home; she worked to support us, but we always had bread to put in our mouths, like a kind word from mother.

In Berukha's story, the bread that fills her siblings' stomachs acts as a substitute for her mother. Berukha raised her siblings while her mother worked away from home. In addition to bread representing nourishment, it took on the qualities of motherly emotions. Instead of the children being filled with motherly love, they were filled with bread.

Mother–child relationships expressed through bread can also be found in Khana's story:

> We were children during those trying times. My father always made sure we had something to eat. He used to cook *khraimah* for us—little pieces of chicken fried with onion

and spices. We would sop it up with *nān*, and he gave us a little cup of arak [liquor] that had saffron and cardamom and *nabāt* [sugar crystals] . . . and also every time that my mother ate something it meant that her food would be tasty to us as well, and we wanted to eat from her plate, even if she had *nān-e khoshk* [dried bread]. Then our mother would tell us this proverb: *Kallāgh bacheh did—nān-e sir nadid* [Mother Crow saw her chicks—nourishing bread she did not see].

Wherever there are children, they eat their mother's food, just like the children that Mother Crow saw, but she didn't see bread. Just like my healthy children, who wanted to eat from my plate, I would remember what my mother used to say to us, and I would repeat the proverb about Mother Crow to them.[5]

Just as Mother Crow did not see a piece of bread but saw her children (in Afghani culture 'to see children' means to give birth), so the mother, who gave birth to her children and raised them, failed to see bread as a matter of immediate concern. While for Berukha bread was a substitute for motherly feelings, in Khana's story the children themselves were the bread. They ate their mother's food and so consumed the totality of motherhood. The mother's bread became an integral part of her children's bodies.

The equation of bread with a mother's love is expressed negatively, however, in a proverb about a stepmother, as told by Shoshana: *Zan-e pedar nān nemidād; vakht-i midād sukhte midād; mosht-o laghad midād* ('A stepmother refused to give bread; when she gave it, she gave it burnt; fists and kicks she used to give').[6] Here bread is used to express the stepmother's negative feelings towards her stepdaughter: at first she was reluctant to give her bread; then she refused to provide her with motherly love and to acknowledge her as her daughter; when she was finally willing to provide some sustenance, she gave her daughter bread that was burnt. Starting as a basic food worthy of being eaten by humans, the stepmother's bread is transformed into bread unfit for human consumption, and is accompanied by violence. Just as bread symbolizes motherly love, burnt bread represents the stepmother's hatred.

Shoshana added credence to this formula by saying:

There were stepmothers who were evil. Just as this proverb is insufferable to the ears, that's how it was. The stepmothers made holes in their stepdaughters' souls. My father had a story about a stepmother who put her stepdaughter into the oven until the rooster came and discovered her.

Shoshana alludes here to the story of *Māhi-Pishāni* or 'Moon-Brow', an Afghani version of the tale of Cinderella. The stepmother hides her husband's daughter in the oven long enough for her to turn into *nān-e sukhte* (burnt bread). Women also used this phrase to refer to an ugly, dirty girl: *Surat-e dokhtar mesl-e nān-e sukhte* ('The girl's face is like burnt bread').

A folk custom of preparing 'doll bread' was common among barren women, both Jewish and Muslim, in Afghanistan. The women created bread in the shape

of dolls called *nān-e arus* ('bread doll'). The Dari term *arus* refers both to a bride and to a doll. In Persian, *arus* or 'bride' also refers to a doll. The face of the Afghan bride looked like a doll's face, adorned with white powder and patches of rouge. The bride affixed a golden disc on her forehead that gave her a doll-like look (cf. Ali 1969: 42–3; Bar'am Ben Yosef 1997: 61–5; Tapper 1991: 157–80).

Barren women dressed their bread dolls in clothing they had sewn and embroidered, placed them in a *nāni* (baby's cradle), and brought them to the wishing tree, usually an ancient, sacred tree called *derakht-e nān/nene* ('the bread tree/mother'), in the hope that they might become *nene* or 'mothers'. The similar sounds of *nān*, *nāni*, and *nene* (bread, cradle, mother) reinforced the barren woman's desire to conceive by presenting this offering to the celestial spirits in order to persuade them to open her locked womb. In the same way as the spirits breathe a soul into the doll, so they can open the womb of a barren woman.

An additional offering, presented to demonic entities, used the *nān-e az mā behtarān* ('bread for our betters', the nickname for demons). Its usage among Afghani women was similar to that of the *khesht*, a magical brick presented by mature women as an offering to *az mā behtarān* ('those better than us'). The brick was made of clay and dried in the sun. In one ritual, women used black charcoal to sketch squares on the brick, and inside each square they placed dried pomegranate peel, a soft-boiled egg, a turquoise stone, splinters of a mirror, a piece of cotton fabric, garlic, and silver coins. A different type of *khesht* was a fired brick: refreshments were placed on one side of this and water sprinkled on the other. The water was 'stabbed' with a knife and the women chanted *Chashm-e bad betarke* ('May the evil eye burst') (Avrahamov 1935; Cowen 1971: 244; Kashani 2001: 147; Yehoshua–Raz 1992: 368–71). In a similar ritual with the *nān-e az mā behtarān* they dropped *espanj* or 'seeds of incense', composed of garlic, onion, a raw egg, and an eye-shaped turquoise stone, on the bread. They made the offering to restore their fertility and remove the evil eye placed upon a barren woman, or conversely, in order that a member of the community would see the offering and pray for the barren woman to become fertile. In addition to offering bread to the demons, Jewish women who experienced infertility in Afghanistan reported that they drank sacred water out of the pomegranate-shaped finials that decorated the Torah scroll and hid breadcrumbs from *nān-e zou* ('birthing mothers' bread') in their lapels. This bread, dipped in fortifying herbs, was baked especially for women who had given birth.

The Jews of Afghanistan used bread to send messages. A mother would bake bread and send it to her husband, mother-in-law, and children. These types of bread included:

(*a*) Bread used as a sort of 'postcard' from a wife to her husband, which passed on messages of importance and had undertones of sexuality. If a wife wanted to have sexual relations following her immersion in the ritual bath (signalling

the end of her period of menstrual impurity), she would bake bread for her husband and place a piece of fresh or preserved fruit alongside it, such as a peach, apricot, or pomegranate, symbolizing the female genitals.

(*b*) Bread used as a 'postcard' from a woman to her mother-in-law, which passed on important messages of appeasement. As Afghani society is patrilocal, a young married woman moved directly into her husband's home, initially serving her mother-in-law and elderly aunts. The woman baked soft bread for them from white flour, called *nān-e lavāsh*, and added spices—such as ground cinnamon, cloves, and ginger—to give the bread flavour and to warm the stomach (*garmi*). This soft, spicy bread, wrapped in a cloth (*boghche*), would be taken by the young woman's children to the relative she was seeking to appease.

(*c*) Bread that served as a 'postcard' from a mother to her children, which served to proclaim her love and encouragement. When a mother wanted to express her joy at her son's success in Torah studies, she would prepare *nān-e shakeri*, a small, sweet loaf fashioned into various shapes. For a daughter getting married and thus leaving her mother's home, the mother would bake *nān-e badāmi*, a sweet bread with sugared almonds, to express her blessings and hopes for the daughter's prosperity and fertility.

Mothers and children could thus exchange messages by means of bread. Interviewees revealed that the children anticipated receiving these messages from their mother because it represented her acceptance of, and praise and love for, them. Similarly, a child was expected to share the bread with his or her siblings or other relatives, to show generosity and respect towards them.

The Dari word *nān*, as in Persian, refers to bread baked by either of two ancient methods (Desmet-Grégoire 1989): in a clay oven (*tanur* or *tandur* in Dari) and on a curved metal plate (*sāj*). Village groups used the former while nomadic groups favoured the latter. In cities such as Herat, where most Jews lived, the ovens were cone-shaped and made of fired clay bricks. Symbolically speaking, the cone-shaped oven was analogous to the mother who watched over the fire, considered a symbol of life, in the same way that she watched over the lives of her family members. The curved metal plate on which the bread was baked symbolized the wandering mother who lacked roots.

In several Afghani Jewish folk tales, the oven represented a liminal space: all that entered it underwent a transformation. In many tales men put wild women in the oven in order to domesticate them. The oven also had a symbolic role in the moral education of girls. For example, a saying addressed to a young mother who did not meet community standards of manners and behaviour was *Beshin be-tanur* ('Sit in the oven'). It admonishes the listener to reflect on her inappropriate behaviour and promise to behave according to the group's rules. This symbolic

act of sitting in the oven enabled the transformation of inappropriate (wild) into appropriate (domesticated) behaviour. As the oven for bread-baking was an integral part of the world of mothers, this structure served on a symbolic level as the site of a woman's or mother's transformation. Afghani Jews did not have a comparable symbol for men or fathers.

The oven's symbolic link to mothers is well known among Afghani Jews from a familiar folk tale about the 'snake woman'. The tale features a snake in the form of a woman who entices a man to marry her (Kort 1974: 129–30; Sadeh 1989: 79–80).[7] A few months pass after the wedding and the man's powers begin to fade; he becomes pale and ill. When he finds out that his wife turns into a snake at night, he follows a dervish's advice, and asks her to bake bread for him. When she bends over the oven to put the dough in, he pushes her inside and shuts the entrance tightly. Three days later he opens the oven and finds a golden skin sloughed off by the snake woman.

In order to understand this story, we should recall that in Afghani Jewish culture mothers were required to work in the domestic sphere and provide nourishment, which included baking bread. The manner in which men related to their wives reflected their perception of them as potential mothers. This treatment began as soon as they were married and did not necessarily wait until they gave birth. This is evident in a variant of the snake-woman story known as 'Nur in the Oven' (*Nur be tanur*) told to me by Berukha:

> There was once a woman who turned out to be a good woman to her husband—modest, cooking, speaking tastefully. Nur was her name, meaning, if you will, 'one who brings light to him'. But, at night, how do you say it, she used to go and sell her body. She was a prostitute. Her husband smelled bad odours coming from her body, smells that were making him ill. His old grandmother was next to him all the time, saying over and over again: 'Nur in the oven'. She was brainwashing him with 'Nur in the oven'. It was like this for several days, and his grandmother was making him crazy. He said to his wife: 'I'd like some bread from your hands. Bake me bread!' This woman kneaded the dough and the moment that she put it into the oven so it would become bread, hop! He pushed her inside. When he opened the oven his wife came out, but not as she used to be . . . the smell from her body was like the smell of freshly baked bread. Good. Not like she used to be before.[8]

In these two folk tales the women undergo a transformation by virtue of being pushed into an oven. This liminal space and the symbolic fire burning within it metaphorically destroy the 'wild' aspect of the two women: the 'animal' in the first story and the promiscuity of the woman in the second. The oven in the folk tales symbolizes a 'cosmic womb' through which women undergo a transition.

Table 1 compares the similarities in the two narratives. Storytellers see the two women, the seductress and the prostitute, as 'wild' women who do not possess the attributes of a traditional wife. Both are devious with their husbands: one because she turns into a snake and the other because she is a prostitute. In both

Table 1 Comparison of plot in the folk tales 'Snake Woman' and 'Nur in the Oven'

	Snake Woman	**Nur in the Oven**
Sexual characteristic of the female in the narrative	Seductress	Prostitute
The Conflict	Depletes her husband's powers; makes her husband ill	Emits bad odours from her body; makes her husband ill
The Adviser	The dervish advises the husband to put his wife into the oven	A grandmother advises the husband to put his wife into the oven
The Transformation	The woman is replaced by a golden skin sloughed off by the snake	The woman is replaced by a woman whose body odour is equated with freshly baked bread

stories, wise figures notice that the husband is ill and advise him to 'cleanse' his wife. The grandmother, wise in the ways of women and their husbands, urges him to put the woman into the oven to ensure that she returns to the existing social order, based upon faithfulness as religious and social norms dictate. Following a period of 'incubation', the husband in the first story finds in the oven a golden snakeskin, a sign that his wife was indeed a snake woman. His reward is the gold. In contrast, the husband in the second story gains a purified wife, worthy of the status of a 'married woman', who possesses a pleasing smell associated with the smell of freshly baked bread.

Magical transformations occur inside the oven: the cover of the sinful body, concealing unacceptable promiscuity, is removed, and replaced with a newfound acceptance of the metaphysical and social norms which characterize women as mothers. The smell of the bread in the oven marks the pure flesh of the fertile woman. On this note, Beruria comments:

> In our town of Herat many eyes were on a bride, judging whether she is a good woman. I remember my grandmother saying that a good woman was one who attended to the oven all day; she was industrious. She baked bread for her children, for her husband. In her own words she would say: *Kojā zan-e nur bālā-ye tanur* ('Where is the woman of light? At the oven').[9]

A woman who can bake bread knows how to transform raw ingredients into cooked food. Metaphorically, she knows how to transform herself at the same time into a culturally acceptable individual—a good wife, mother, and grandmother—who meets the community's social and moral standards.

The link in Afghani Jewish culture between bread and a woman's fertility is reinforced by the popular proverb traditionally said to a young man about choosing a wife: *Begir in dokhtar ke dass-ash yād dāre khemir bokone* ('Take the young

woman whose hands know how to knead dough').[10] If she knows how to knead dough, the proverb implies, she will be fertile, and the groom can be sure she will bring physical and spiritual sustenance to her family. It is her ability to make bread, considered a difficult skill to master, that makes her virtuous and suitable for the roles she is expected to fulfil. We might extrapolate by saying that a mother who bakes bread can provide solutions to society's ills, and maintain order in her family and in the community.

The kneading and baking of dough also required the skills involved in lighting a clay oven and keeping it burning. This knowledge was often necessary for a young bride, who had to demonstrate her skills to her mother-in-law. Rakhel reflected, for example:

> I got married at age fourteen. I remember well . . . already from the first month before I menstruated, my mother-in-law put flour and sugar in my hand and told me to make bread from them. I knew I was under her watchful gaze. My hands shook like this . . . I remember the first time I baked bread. I don't even remember the taste of the bread. Just my fear, and the voice of my mother-in-law confirming to my husband that I would be a good wife. That I would be a good mother.[11]

A mother-in-law would evaluate the worthiness of a prospective daughter-in-law by assessing her bread-baking skills. The 'light in the oven' (*nur be tanur*), meaning the light and the heat of the burning fuel that enables the bread to bake, was likened to the feminine light reflected in the young bride's attributes and skills, which also indicated the kind of mother she would become in the future. Thus, the woman who bends over the oven metonymically represents the woman working to provide the needs of her husband and her children (see Badinter 1981).

Afghani Jews used the expression *sar dar tanur* ('the head in the oven') to refer to a woman who hides her thoughts, implying that her mood was inscrutable. She 'cooked' her thoughts, and it was impossible to know how she would behave. When a Jewish girl first began to menstruate, one of her mother's duties was to teach her how to bake bread and, in the course of the baking, to teach her the Jewish laws about menstrual impurity and purity. Although the laws relating to menstrual impurity did not apply to a young woman before she got married, she was forbidden, during her period, to bake bread, or to touch a cooking utensil or a piece of bread that was not hers. She was allowed, however, to rake the ashes from the oven into the dustpan, because it was believed that fire and its by-products (ashes and smoke) had the ability to cleanse impurity by contact. Thus the social and religious fear of impurity was also resolved through the bread and the oven. Similarly, the first thing a Jewish woman would make after immersing herself in the ritual bath at the end of her menstrual period was bread. In doing so, she would effectively 'proclaim' her purity and be entitled to return to the public arena.

Other proverbs, such as *az tanur tā takhte* ('from the oven and to the bed'), denote the expected path for the fertile woman, from the baking of bread in the oven to the 'baking' of a baby in her womb. The act of cooking was juxtaposed with sexual intercourse, and the making of bread with conception. Among many Jewish groups in Israel there exists a bond between the rising of bread and the development of life in a woman's womb. Wedding planners suggest a parallel between a woman and bread with a sexual connotation, such as 'the bride's bagel', a custom practised among Sephardi communities in Turkey. As the bride emerges from the ritual bath taken before the wedding, the *roskah*, a yeast cake in the shape of a bagel, is held above her head. Similarly in Jewish communities from Georgia, women used to bake bread called *kabluli*—a wedding bread made with eggs, milk, and sugar and decorated with candles and silver coins. Following the marriage ceremony the bride's mother performed a wedding dance with the bride and the *kabluli* bread. Bread is also widely considered a symbol of fertility in Muslim culture.

The oven represents the incubation vessel in which women undergo a transformation from a wild woman to a cultivated woman, from a newly married woman lacking life skills to a mother who knows how to nourish her family in both a material and a spiritual sense. The oven has transformative powers, belonging to the feminine space and serving the concept of a proper social order.

Conclusion

The Jews of Afghanistan elaborated a discourse based on bread-related imagery to refer to motherhood. Each stage of the preparation of bread—from the sifting of flour to its baking in the oven—expressed some idea about their conception of motherhood. Members of the community associated bread with mothers, whether through the analogy of smell or that of hunger: hungering for a child was likened to longing for bread. The Afghani Jewish mother cared for her children, educated them, and gave them warmth and love. Just as bread was available daily, so was the mother available in her children's lives. In contrast, Afghani Jewish fathers went on journeys for weeks or even months at a time to engage in trade and came home infrequently. This social context explains the proverb: 'Mother is like bread and father is like meat.' The mother was the 'gatherer', grinding wheat and baking bread, and the father was the 'hunter', bringing meat for roasting and cooking in the kitchen. Bread was the stable element in family meals and meat was served mainly on the sabbath and festivals, when both parents were at home.

These binary associations of mother–bread, father–meat, and the meanings linked to them, defined the figure of the mother and her role in the family. Afghani Jews regarded the mother as a beloved woman who had the power to educate, teach, care for, and worry about the needs of her household, as well as to cure her children when they were ill. The woman was initiated into motherhood

through the baking of bread, equated with the foetus's gestation in the womb. This symbolism is not unique to Afghan Jewry; a common English phrase for a pregnant woman is 'she has a bun in the oven' (Bryan and Mieder 2005: 115; Kövecses 2015: 143). Thus the womb is equated with the oven, in which processes of change occur. The oven also has the ability to 'cleanse', as seen in folk tales and related proverbs. In Afghani Jewish lore, a woman with a wild nature was transformed, when 'baked' in an oven, into a culturally acceptable woman.

A woman's place in the social hierarchy of Afghani Jewish culture changed according to her reproductive abilities. A woman was called *zan* as long as she experienced menstruation, regardless of whether she had already conceived; the man (husband, father, or father-in-law) controlled her fertility for the purpose of giving birth and furthering the family line. The status of a post-menopausal woman was comparable to that of a man, though her specific position in the social hierarchy was determined by her marital status and her previous fertility rather than, as in the case of men, her role in the wider world. Just as different names were given to different types of bread, so different nicknames, identical to the names for these breads, were assigned to different types of women.

The Afghani Jewish community charged mothers with the responsibility of providing sustenance. The bread they baked represented the protection of the family and the social and religious values of the community. Three generations of women—grandmother, mother, and daughter—held the key to maintaining life and the community's survival in Afghanistan. Experienced in life and in raising a family, the grandmother (*sar gozasht*, 'wise woman') passed on the significance of the role of motherhood to her granddaughters by means of the ceremonial baking of bread. The daughter, regarded as a young woman who needed to be protected from immorality, received a moral education through training in baking bread. It proved that she was 'pure' and worthy of the role of mother. The name 'mother' was used not only in the biological sense, to describe a woman who had given birth to children, but also to designate a woman capable of supplying the needs of the community and protecting it from illness, hunger, and social chaos. Mothers carried the strength and power to maintain order in the community, and they accomplished this through bread. The migration to Israel altered the core of Afghani Jewish culture, at least in part because of the changed role of bread and bread-making mothers. No longer baking in a courtyard oven, and increasingly working outside the home, Afghani Jews in Israel joined a national consumer culture by buying standardized bread in grocery stores.

Notes

1 This custom is also known in Zoroastrian culture as 'dream bread'. When a Zoroastrian child has a bad dream, his mother tears the bread into three triangles. The child tells the bread his bad dream, the mother crumbles the bread, and together they feed the birds. See Simmons 2002: 516.

2 Dari belongs to the Indo-Iranian family of languages, and is phonetically similar to Persian. It is currently the most widely spoken language in Afghanistan. See Dupree 1980: 66–7.

3 I interviewed men too, but they did not articulate the meaning behind the proverb 'Mother is like bread' as the women did, so I have not quoted them directly.

4 Shushan was born in Kabul in 1932 and emigrated to Israel in 1958. The interview was recorded on 13 June 2005.

5 Khana Z. was born in 1939 in Israel, to parents from Afghanistan. The interview was recorded on 15 May 2005.

6 Shoshana was born in Herat in 1943 and emigrated to Israel in 1951. The interview was recorded on 21 September 2011.

7 In the sources I cite, this tale type is described as unique to Afghani Jews. The standard reference for folk literature of the Aarne-Thompson-Uther tale type index (Uther 2004) lists Tale Type 1121: 'The Ogre's Wife Burned in Her Own Oven', in which she is tricked into climbing into her own oven, but in the 'snake woman' story the husband is not depicted as an ogre. The symbolism of the woman as a snake is unusual in folk literature; the snake, with its phallic associations, is usually a man. But the index lists Tale Type 409A 'The Girl as a Snake' from eastern Europe, in which a snake pulled out of a fire turns into a woman and marries her rescuer. The husband promises never to call his wife 'snake' but breaks his promise, and the woman changes back into a snake.

8 Berukha was born in Herat in 1936 and emigrated to Israel in 1951. The interview was recorded on 19 July 1998. Berukha told the story 'Nur be tanur' as part of a discussion on the characteristics of a 'good woman' and a 'bad woman' in Afghani society. She heard the story in her youth from her grandmother in Herat.

9 Beruria was born in Herat in 1937 and emigrated to Israel in 1951. The interview was recorded on 12 November 2006.

10 In Arab cultures the proverb is: 'Take the one whose hands are covered with dough and she is a woman of valour.' See Shukri 2006: 183.

11 Rakhel was born in Herat in 1933 and emigrated to Israel in 1951. The interview was recorded on 22 December 2008.

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