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## A Game of Social Exclusion and Inclusion: The Process of Cooking in the Film “The Cakemaker”

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### ABSTRACT:


Cultural and communal boundaries of Iran are strongly defined in the film “The Cakemaker”. This paper seeks to explore these boundaries by way of studying cooking as a defining element in the process of segregation and exclusion. The paper also seeks to locate the relevance of the term 'Kosher' in the 21<sup>st</sup> century context of present-day Iranian cafes, restaurants and commercial kitchens. Thus, by way of analysing the culinary narratives entwined within the film, and cooking as a cultural process its impact on interpersonal relationships between characters in the film can be understood. Themes of alienation, cultural contact and exclusion on the grounds of religion can be observed throughout the film. These themes can be discussed in reference to the characters in the film. The aim of the paper is also to recognise the role of cooking in coping, grieving and expressing love, sexuality and the assertion of the characters' identities as seen in the film.

**Keywords:** Jewish, Sabbath, Kosher, Sexuality, Alienation, Cultural Contact, Religion, Cooking, Food, Coping, Grieving, Separation.

### A Game of Social Exclusion and Inclusion: The Process of Cooking in the Film “The Cakemaker”

“The Cakemaker” is an Israeli-German film by Ofir Raul Graizer that establishes the intersection of the process of cooking, food and cultural exclusion. First screened in 2017 in Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, the film attempts to offer perspectives on multiple issues ranging from the social and cultural to the personal. Thomas, a young German baker and café owner involves in an affair with Oren, an Israeli man who often visits Berlin due to his work. After Oren dies in a car crash, heartbroken Thomas decides to visit his lover's family in Jerusalem. Without revealing the truth, he works for Anat, Oren's widow, who runs her own café. But Thomas' stay at Anat's café is threatened by the tough laws of kosher that the town follows, and because of Moti, Anat's brother who is not approving of Anat employing a German in the café. Finding solace in each other's presence, they get intimate and mark the beginning of an affair. Thomas keeps his identity hidden throughout, until Anat identifies the resemblance of a note written by Thomas to a note she found in Oren's bag. She eventually discovers the multiple voicemails that Thomas sent Oren after his death. Moti confronts a guilty Thomas and threatens him into returning to Germany. Three months later, Anat, still not over her feelings for Thomas,

visits his café in Germany discreetly and watches him from a distance as he locks the front door.

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Cooking in the film can be interpreted as a process that lends itself to both social exclusion and inclusion which can be observed at different points in the film. It is how people in a small town in Jerusalem perceive the entry of a non-Jewish person, that too, a German at that, in the kitchens of Jewish restaurants and cafes. Is Kosher simply a concept that should be seen as an exercise in the assertion of one's Jewish identity or is it a tool that is derogatorily exclusive in theory and practice in commercial Iranian kitchens? As the film demands comments on such questions, it also weaves the narrative of the uncommon love triangle through the process of cooking. As much as Thomas is seen as an outsider in the café's kitchen, he is also an outsider (and an intruder in the eyes of Moti) in Anat's family. Cooking and consumption are shown to be acts that contain within themselves the different stages of loss suffered by the characters, namely - grieving, coping and eventually moving on. This paper intends to study the above-mentioned issues as belonging to two different spheres of an individual's life- The Social and the Personal. This is done specifically in the context of present-day Jerusalem and Judaism, as portrayed in the film.

The film suggests that cooking is employed as a tool that facilitates social exclusion. From beyond the surface that shows cooking as an act of “self-preservation”, it is an act of resistance (Wilson). The religious aspect of the film plays an important role in validating these protests against outsiders of the community. A working example of this exclusive act is 'Kosher'. Defining kosher food has become a difficult task because of the rapidly globalizing Jewish community. Primarily defined as food that follows the dietary laws of Judaism, the definition of Kosher has been modified and interpreted in different ways. A basic rule that was to be followed was that meat and milk are never to be consumed together, which is also can be seen as a rule in Jewish households that meat and milk should not be cooked in proximity (Hutt) The same is portrayed in the film, where Moti tells Thomas that the house is kosher and that he would want him to keep it that way.

“You're not Jewish,  
but this is a Kosher apartment.  
and it has to stay Kosher.  
The owner trusts me.  
(*The Cakemaker*, 39:21-39:26)

Virtue of being kosher is also seen when Moti and Anat panic on seeing Thomas use the oven in the café's kitchen. A series of these events and the insistence that the characters place on Thomas not cooking is demonstrative of the exclusion that is being discussed.

“...you cannot  
turn on the oven, okay?  
You're not Jewish, so this is not  
Kosher. You understand?  
We cannot use it, we have  
to throw it in the garbage now.  
If Avram sees this,  
your cafe is finished, Anat.”  
(*The Cakemaker*, 31:26- 31:34)

Eventually, Anat comes to accept Thomas' baking and uses his products for her orders. But soon word gets out that the food isn't really kosher and therefore the café's kosher certificate gets revoked. This can be seen as a resistance to

conformity that Anat exhibits, which is also present throughout the film. While she follows kosher in her café, she does not follow it ceremoniously in her house. “Differences in kosher preferences occur not only between households in the Jewish community, but also within them” (Buckser, 201). This is demonstrative of the shifting religious adherence in contemporary times. While Anat is not ceremonious, her brother tries to teach his nephew his own ideals.

Cooking becomes an art through which the characters express their grief. With both Anat and Thomas being people who closely work with food, their joy, happiness and all other emotions are expressed through cooking. The director establishes this at multiple places in the film. It stands out alone in the scene succeeding the revelation that Thomas and Oren were once involved in a relationship. Moti confronts Thomas and threatens him. Unable to take the abuse and threat, Thomas silently weeps but does not stop kneading the dough. The dough becomes an object of endearment, solace and warmth.

Cooking also helps in asserting one's repressed sexual identity in the film. This can be observed in all the characters. Thomas, Anat and Oren have all, in their respective ways, connect with each other through a mutual love for cooking and food. The kitchen of the café in which Thomas and Anat get intimate spontaneously one evening, is a safe space that consoles the two of them in their grief. The distinct dividing line between home and outside, and all stereotypes pertaining to notions of gendered roles are debunked. Here, cooking becomes an act of protest, love and kinship. The final act that bridges the gap between social exclusion and inclusion is Sabbath. The exclusion that Thomas faces in other instances are challenged by the hospitality that the family extends on Sabbath days. Jewish dietary laws prohibit cooking on the day of Sabbath. Therefore, Anat's family provides Thomas with food and treat him warmly. The gesture is performative of the kinship that the community holds important.

Thus, through the process of cooking, the film shows various social, cultural and personal preferences that are exercised by the characters. Their identities evolve from where they are, at the beginning of the film, to where the plot takes them through cooking and affinity towards food. Thus, it facilitates various intersections such as food and sexuality, and food and grieving to exist simultaneously and provide newer labels to already established ones.

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