



Novel of Collective Decay: Prefabricated Identities, Spiritual Void and Excluded Existence in Margaret Drabble's *The Ice Age*

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Abstract

The transitional period of the 1970s Britain being fictionalized in Margaret Drabble's novel, *The Ice Age* (1977), provides the ground for theoretical discussion of the present paper that is based on the insights of Giorgio Agamben. It will inspect the way Drabble interprets socio-political issues dominant in the 1970s and the way these issues affect her outlook. In this paper, considering the figure of an excluded existence in *The Ice Age*, Agamben's biopolitical insights are examined to see how they may contribute to understanding of the dark side of sovereignty and the potentiality to transform democracies into totalitarian states. Taking the precariousness of the emotional, political and, ontological faculties of "love", "homo sacer", and "bare life" allocated to human being by sovereignty, it offers a different view of Drabble's subjects on love and socio-political problems, maintaining that Agamben's account of these issues supplies an underlying structure of the form-of-life. The paper also, through the striking features of Agamben's discourse, approaches the concept of bare life and knits it to the concepts of instrumentalism, labor, slavery, and life, and fundamentally presents the awareness of self in political view. The characters examine some potentialities that may help them to break away from the prevailing deadlocks of the era. It is eventually shown that these practices, which according to Agamben may lead to a form-of-life that is called a happy life, conclude in the exclusion and spiritual void of the individuals.

Keywords: Agambenian love, whatever being, homo sacer, bare life, form-of-lif

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Introduction

One of the controversial debates in British history is the 1970s, an era when a sense of ending prevailed. It is remembered as a decade of embarrassment and tastelessness, a period of repression and difficulty. Britain, once being the global ruling power, after the two wars has lost its grace and now, in the seventies, the shifts of global power, some old and sold terminology on humanity, are redefined and presented in literary works portraying man's ontological position within society. One of the prominent writers of this period is Margaret Drabble who explores England's condition and the individuals' non-smooth trajectory in that decade. She is considered as a novelist who writes about women's concerns, expectations, and mid-life female identity. "From the middle seventies onwards, Margaret Drabble became increasingly occupied as a novelist with representing and explaining the state of an increasingly-troubled nation" (Harper, 2014, p. 235). *The Ice Age* (1977) is one of these novels that highlights the condition of people in the 1970s, and this paper intends to analyze the literary and socio-political views of it by Giorgio Agamben's insights relevant to this matter.

The relation between Drabble's novel with some methodological statements and highly sophisticated insights of Giorgio Agamben constitutes a crux for commentary on the relation between life and form. In order to accomplish this matter, a widely discussed insights of Agamben such as, "love", "homo sacer", and "bare life", which have been used in political, philosophical, sociological, literary, and legal issues, are considered as efficient tools for excavating the novel under study. Although Drabble's focus on the subject of personal and emotional struggles of the individuals in the chaotic world around them is evident, this article aims to dissect these emotional struggles under the light of Agambenian love to see whether it will act as a means of escape from the dire state and to notice whether it will lead them to a happy life. In order to shed new light on this emotional practice, these vulnerable individuals through social conventions and political structures are evidently transformed into a form of being that Agamben calls *homo sacer*. The argument also observes Agamben's paradigm of "concentration camp" to apprehend the above-mentioned struggles of individuals in a camp-like life and also to illustrate that they are transformed into a constructed bare life. These prefabricated identities may banish the individuals of Agambenian form-of-life.

The present study gains significance as the findings can shed more light on Agamben's objective to construct a form-of-life, a life that is inseparable from its form, and, in this manner, to provide the reader with an account of biopolitical view to claim that the purpose of ruling sovereignty, either democratic or totalitarian, is alike, that is to construct a bare life. In this case, there will be no difference between a camp and a city, and every human being – citizens, refugees, immigrants, ethnic groups – in any settings may experience the potentiality of being a *homo sacer* suspended of their basic rights. This paper intends to consider the setting of Drabble's novel, *The Ice Age*, as a paradigmatic concentration camp to analyze the characters, as an individual and collective, in British society. It is rather an invitation to read Agamben that dares to show the originality of his political thought in contemporary matters, and offer new perspectives on the key political issues of modern time.

Review of Literature

Agambenian Criticism

Terms such as sovereignty, the exception, biopolitics, and life are used today with reference to Agamben. His widely-read book, *Homo Sacer* (1998) is one of Giorgio Agamben's thought provoking books about being and its connection with politics. In *Homo Sacer* (1998), Agamben aims to connect the problem of pure possibility, potentiality, and power with the problem of political and social ethics in a context where the latter has lost its previous religious, metaphysical, and cultural grounding. For Agamben, there are some aspects of human life that are informed by political conceptions. He investigates with great depth and acuteness the implicit presence of an idea of biopolitics in the history of traditional political theory. He argues that from the earliest times, say, in Aristotle's notion of man as a political animal to the history of Western thinking about sovereignty, it implies the power of sovereignty over human being and life. In this book, he wants to understand how ideas and plans enter into the realm of politics that is also the main goal of this study, too. As a whole, Agamben probes into human rights abuses, and invasion of personal freedoms or any other form of personal harm.

Also, in *The Use of Body: Homo sacer* (2016), Agamben approaches the concept of bare life through a political point of view and knits it to the concepts of slavery, labor, instrumentalism, and life and fundamentally presents the awareness of self in political view. First, he differentiates between human being and other living beings and calls him a unique being that is capable of a "political life". In other words, by "politicizing" its life, he renders it "self-sufficient" of taking part in the polis. He continues, "what we call politics is above all a special qualification of life, carried out by means of a series of partitions that pass through the very body of *zoè*" (Agamben, 2016, p. 203). Agamben, additionally, states that in modern languages the opposition between *zoe* and *bios* gradually disappears and in fact, the term "form-of-life" indicates a life that cannot be isolated from its form, "a life in which it is never possible to isolate and keep distinct something like a bare life" (Agamben, 2016, p. 207).

After the attacks of 9/11, the Bush administration authorized the indefinite detention of non-citizens suspected of terrorist activities and their subsequent trials by a military commission. In *State of Exception* (2005), Agamben uses such circumstances to argue that this unusual extension of power, or "state of exception", has historically been an under-examined and powerful strategy that has the potential to transform democracies into totalitarian states. The sequel to Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), *State of Exception* (2005) is the first book to theorize the state of exception in historical and philosophical context and deals with the concept of *Homo Sacer* in relation with the state of exception. Agamben argues that the state of exception has become in the contemporary society a paradigmatic practice of the West, which transforms individuals into subjects prone to exclusion or extermination.

Watkin (2014), in *Agamben and Indifference: A Critical Overview*, studies Agamben's insights on biopolitics and mentions

Biopolitics as a formation reveals the archaeology of power, which is division into two opposing categories of condition (common) and conditioned (proper) distributed across time and different discourses through the signature of life, which operates at various points as common, proper and now, in our age, the commonality of the proper or the individual's universal right to life. (Watkin, 2014, p. 184)

Then, Watkin concludes that,

Agamben radicalizes Foucault's project by arguing that "the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original—if concealed—nucleus of sovereign power. *It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power*", meaning of course that biopolitics is at least as old as sovereign exception. (Watkin, 2014, p. 185)

Whyte (2013), in her book *Catastrophe and Redemption: The Political Thought of Giorgio Agamben*, considers Agamben's critical account of contemporary politics—his argument that Western politics has been "biopolitics" since its inception, his critique of human rights, his argument that the state of exception is now the norm, and the paradigmatic significance he attributes to the concentration camp—and shows that it is in the midst of these catastrophes of the present that Agamben sees the possibility of a form of profane redemption. According to Whyte, in Agamben's view, a politics premised on substantive identities fixes its subjects, and makes it a process of apportioning rights and representing pre-given constituencies rather than a field of possibility and transformation in which we could hope to be other than we are. (Whyte, 2013, p. 145)

A politics, with the help of sovereign power and under the mask of the state of exception, regulates rights and produces fixed, under-controlled identities. Whyte considering Agamben's beliefs mentions that

In order to escape such a politics, it is necessary to contest both the fixity of personal identity and the substantivization of community as a community *of* (women, Australians, etc.), which, in his view, brings into operation the mechanism of inclusive exclusion of the sovereign ban. (Whyte, 2013, p. 145)

This generated self which is neither universal nor particular is termed by Agamben as "whatever being" and is seen as "marking the possibility of a human community free of any essential condition of belonging, common destiny or work, or principle of inclusion and exclusion" (Whyte, 2013, p. 145).

Studies on Margaret Drabble and *The Ice Age*

As a transitional period when the optimism of the 1960s deteriorates into the socio-political stability and consent of the 1980s, the seventies starts with the effects of the movements of 1968 and ends with the election of Thatcher in 1979. The state of collapse, in this decade, draws on a variety of causes; Black (2004) refers to the number of labor-relations crises of the 1970s that provide England with the loss of more working days than in the 1960s. These crises discourage investment and make it harder to maintain productivity increases and economic growth. This situation discredits the postwar social democratic consensus (Black, 2004, p. 101). Among

other social transitions of the decade is the decline of religion that draws the state to the decline of the general social values. In Black's words, "the church appeared divided and unsure of itself" (Black, 2004, p. 110); there is an apparent gap between the church and the state that reflects the general social values (Black, 2004, p. 110). Considering the condition of Britain in this decade during which a sense of ending prevailed, Margaret Drabble wrote some novels that are known as pathologic novels. *The Ice Age*, being one of them, has drawn the attention of critics; it has been analyzed from manifold approaches such as gender, class, cultural and feministic points of view to mention some of them.

Harper (2014) in chapter eight of his book, *Culture in Crisis: The English Novel in the Late Twentieth Century*, "Margaret Drabble and the State of Nation" explores the relationship between politics and literature in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s. He examines the "state of the nation" novels by Drabble in terms of their contribution to the political discourse of this significant period in British post-war history which witnessed the transition from the post-war social-democratic settlement to the establishment of the Thatcherite hegemony. Harper considers Drabble's *The Ice Age* as a realist novel in which the image of frozen time that functions as a "perfectly plausible metaphor for social paralysis" (Harper, 2014, p. 236).

Stovel (1994) in her essay, "Rebelling Against the Regency: Jane Austen and Margaret Drabble", studies Drabble's novels and the influence they get from the novelist Jane Austen and mentions that Drabble criticizes Austen for her view about the subjects of marriage and maternity. She believes that

These are the very powers that Drabble does choose to pursue; however, her novels present the problems of marriage and motherhood. Drabble is one of the first novelists to take us behind the curtain of comedy, as she follows her heroines beyond the happy-ever-after ending. (Stovel, 1994, p.164).

Stovel concludes, "Drabble is one of the first novelists to take us beyond the altar to show us the reality of matrimony through gritty domestic detail" (Stovel, 1994, p. 165).

Duran (2006) in her paper, "Fiction, History and Philosophy: The work of Margaret Drabble", claims that in many ways, Drabble's work about contemporary (or recently past) Britain is exemplar of the sort of historically-oriented fiction. Here she is concerned largely with Drabble's *The Ice Age*, about a post-seventies' Britain responding to another turn in the boom and bust cycle. She argues that history is profoundly important in the work of Margaret Drabble. Moreover, Hatrigova (2009) in her thesis, "British Society from the 1960s to the 1990s in Four Novels by Margaret Drabble", maintains that Drabble's novels, traditional in style, display the allegiance to realism which is depicted through the eyes of various protagonists set in different times and places. The unpleasant state of affairs of the nation consequently has also a negative impact on the main protagonists who then seem to be imprisoned in their situations with little chance of improvement. The bad conditions of the country restrict the people and mirror their limited degree of freedom. All these studies are genuine academic enterprises in their own field; however, no analysis has so far addressed Drabble's *The Ice Age* from Agambenian

biopolitical perspective to introduce human being as a mere homo sacer who is turned into a constructed bare life by sovereign power.

Discussion

As a novelist, Margaret Drabble writes exhaustively on the subjects of contemporary English society and also portrays the domestic life including love, marriage, and maternal subjects. The bulk of her work is about the nature of English society and culture; Harper (2014) claims that her novels are “pathological” that portray “the state of nation” (Harper, 2014, p. 235). *The Ice Age*, one of these novels, depicts a society in which the characters, mainly Anthony and Alison, through a non-smooth trajectory struggle to survive. Drabble herself regarding the title, *The Ice Age*, explains to a reviewer that it is “shorthand for economic depression - everything frozen including wages” (As cited in Cronan Rose, 1980, p. 117). In this novel, England is experiencing an ice age; its traditional and social structures are breaking down, and the characters are introduced to the reader as suffering beings; however, they endeavor to stay safe and sound, to be able to have a happy life.

Agambenian Love vs. Frozen Hearts

Throughout history, the concept of love has been one of the integral subject matters in novels, for love seems to strengthen the emotional part of life that brings along mirth and excitement. Giorgio Agamben, being engaged with the concept of “love”, is concerned with its consequences in individuals’ personal and social life. Even though he does not write about it directly, love can be inferred everywhere in Agamben’s writings. The main feature of Agambenian love is that it should not be confused with either desire or any erotism; in Julian Wolfreys’ words, “love must be maintained as other to them (desire or erotism)” (Wolfreys, 2008, p. 149). Love is also a concept evident in Drabble’s fiction, *The Ice Age*. The novel starts portraying some public and private complications that control the characters’ morals and values in life; accordingly, these issues lead individuals to a completely different model of intimacy and love. Actually, love, in this novel, is carried out as a struggle to survive rather than experiencing the warmth of any emotions.

The “other” is crucial to the matter of love. As Wolfreys, in his essay, “Love and the Other: The Example of Giorgio Agamben”, mentions, there is a singular relationship between a “self” and an “other”, wherein “the self is the other, for the other, an other self already” (2015, p. 47). The fascinating point that Wolfreys indicates is that our otherness to others is not the same for every “other” whom we confront. This concept of otherness can be closely touched with “love” that leads in the clarification of the question of self. At first glance, the concept of love introduced by Drabble in her novel indicates the isolated individuals who try to make connections with each other. The novel introduces Anthony Keating, the male protagonist, as an isolated character “who had not died of his heart attack” (Drabble, 2013, p. 1); he lives in his suburban house far from London and “had been forbidden sex as well as butter, nicotine and alcohol” (Drabble, 2013, p. 2). He is a property developer that due to some inflation “had paid a great deal for this most undeveloped view” (Drabble, 2013, p. 2). The setting of the novel suggests that

overnight everything turns from the boom to the bust and most of the once middle-class families have lost everything: property, health, and even identity.

Alison Murray is another major character who endures various problems in different stages of her life. She, once having been an outstanding actress due to her beauty, now is divorced with two daughters one of whom is mentally retarded; she is Anthony's intimate partner. Her too much attention to her mentally retarded daughter, Molly, keeps her other daughter, Jane, away from her: "Jane, as cross and perverse as she had ever been" (Drabble, 2013, p. 36). This puts Alison into trouble because she cannot share her equal attention with both of them: "she could not divide herself in two. She could save Jane, or Molly, but not both. So, she had committed herself to saving the one that could not be saved" (Drabble, 2013, p. 171). This makes her vulnerable to embitter manner of Jane because she believes her mother "always put her [Molly] first ... never gave a fuck about [Jane]" (Drabble, 2013, p. 127).

Related to the matter of identity which is the core of the characters' struggle in this novel, Whyte (2013) examines Agamben's attempt to found a community without identity based on an experience of love and sets forth that Agamben's "Global Petty Bourgeoisie" or "coming community" goes beyond the possibility that the commodity itself could be redeemed, and plays a central role in his account of the new form of singularity without identity that he terms "whatever being" and in the potential community he terms the "coming community". (p. 144)

The Agambenian "whatever being" is clearly noticed in *The Ice Age* by examining the social, political, and economic condition of beings in society; the nature of male-female orientation, including power, sexuality, and class, reveals the overthrow of human values that may be the prophecy of a collective decay. More pertinently on this account, Drabble portrays "a shabby, mangy old lion" (Drabble, 2013, p. 76) and writes "a novel devoted to unemployment, shocking prices, critical conditions of property market, cutback in marriages and consequent widespread hardship" (Hartigova, 2009, p. 7) rather than a whatever being devoted to an experience of love. Love, introduced in *The Ice Age*, illustrates the isolated individuals who try to make connections with family, lovers, and as a whole with the world. Accordingly, in the novel, the central characters show conflicting social, financial, and family backgrounds that influence their values and morals. These whatever beings, quite confused in the world around them, reflect that the least highlighted concern for them is the matter of intimacy and love.

The Ice Age is a novel of frozen hearts; nevertheless, as love is the evidence of one's happiness, the characters make an effort to initiate it into their lives. As concerned, Julian Wolfreys (2015) elaborates on Agambenian concept of love as something whose possibility of occurrence is not necessary for the existence of the being. He mentions that love is the name of the "other"; when you find yourself "in love", you "see the other's being in its most naked state" (Wolfreys, 2015, p. 48); in other words, you are affected by this state of being "in love" in a way that you cannot be repaired or corrected because your ontology is interrupted. Thus, love is not instinctive; it is something "crafted", and yet the least apparent; as it should not

be confused and conflated with “either desire or any erotism”, as a result, “love as other is unavailable to definition or determination” (Wolfreys, 2015, p. 48). In *The Ice Age*, Anthony Keating due to a heart attack is forbidden to sex, smoke, and alcohol, but, as Hartigova claims, even the heart attack had not been the final blow aimed by fate at Anthony Keating. The heart attack had proved to have compensations, the chief of which was Alison, who stood by him, slept by him, diverted him, and paid him more attention than she usually thought his due, making him, for once, her first priority. (Hartigova, 2009, p. 9)

Anthony and Alison, both having experienced unsuccessful marital life, think they can love each other because they have many things in common and can make a good match:

She, like Anthony, had an unsatisfactory and feckless spouse, an actor of pathologically jealous and pathologically unfaithful temperament; like Anthony, she had been through a process of slow disillusion with her past life. She was an actress, but had abandoned the stage on the birth of her second daughter, who suffered quite severely from cerebral palsy. (Drabble, 2013, p. 28)

Their love, in fact, due to their special conditions, lacks any desire or erotism and is not a passionate one. Furthermore, love has a “phantasmatic character” and is always at risk of “ending up like Narcissus (who succumbs to his own love for an *ymage*) or like Pygmalion (who loved a lifeless image)” (Agamben, 1993, p. 121). It could be argued that when you are in love, you cannot consider the other as an object, and for this reason, it cannot be determined by desire or erotism. Love can be regarded as a temporal event that only in the time of being experienced, one can apprehend one’s self in the form of the other. Accordingly, as Anthony and Alison’s love is not based on erotism and as they do not consider the other as an object of desire, it can be contemplated to and compared with Agambenian love.

Wolfreys (2015) confirms, being “in love”, you may not consider the loved one as the object of desire nor may it be seen as a property. When Alison meets Anthony, due to her vexing past experiences, she has turned into a “mean, embittered, angry, contemptuous woman” (Drabble, 2013, p. 29); they met each other at a party in which she felt herself to be standing in the last ditch of pleasantness, smiling faintly and politely and hopelessly, resolving never to smile at another adult again, knee-deep in an intense dislike of almost everybody she had ever met, or might ever meet, including the good people of her professional life. (Drabble, 2013, p. 29)

Anthony is attracted by “the nonsexual aroma of her unhappiness” and also by her “undisguised boredom”, and as he is a “good talker, a good listener, a man of tact and feeling” (Drabble, 2013, p. 29), Anthony succeeds to interest her. They have much in common even in their feelings of being defeated. Alison understands Anthony, she is willing “to listen to Anthony’s financial problems and ambitions with some real understanding” (Drabble, 2013, p. 29). This mutual understanding may lead to gain knowledge of self that is the ideal of Agambenian love.

To elaborate more, love is a kind of relationship in which a space is created between self and other. Within this space, first they know the other and then this

knowledge ends up in knowing the self. What is more, this space does not belong to anybody; it is a kind of circuit; they start their journey to know and identify their self. It is in this sense that love is seen as “the pre-condition of knowledge” (Wolfreys, 2015, p. 49). Anthony and Alison love each other devoid of any sexual desires; however, their affinity is not a joyless one based on materialism and money. Alison is a pretty woman and Anthony finds her a kind of woman that one could take anywhere: “She dressed well, looked after herself, kept herself in excellent condition, and devoted much energy to preventing herself, successfully, from growing fat, gray, and wrinkled” (Drabble, 2013, p. 30). Despite her beauty, she is not a “vain woman” and not a “flirtatious one”; she finds “sexual admiration” something “genuinely boring” and this makes Anthony feel “very pleased with himself for having overcome it” (Drabble, 2013, p. 30).

Similarly, Alison finds Anthony sweet and believes that Anthony was a spontaneously affectionate person, that he was generous with his praise and his money, that he often opened doors for her, that he frequently had a worried expression that stirred her maternal spirit. That he recognized that she was *the* beautiful woman, rather than *a* beautiful woman. He was also extremely sweet to her defective daughter, Molly. (Drabble, 2013, p. 30)

It is what Agamben calls a singularity “in its being *such as it is*” (Agamben, 1990, p. 1). In other words, “The lover wants the loved one *with all of its predicates*, its being such as it is” (Agamben, 1990, p. 2). What is lovable in Anthony is his manner that refines him from such-and-such property. “She would not have left him during the past year, while ruin was hanging over him, nor would she have left him had ruin, bankruptcy, and disgrace overtaken him” (Drabble, 2013, p. 180). Then, when Anthony starts drinking again, Alison thinks she is free to reconsider her situation -to leave Anthony and start anew-, but she knows that “she could not face a repetition of the past years” (Drabble, 2013, p. 180). She considers the rough conditions she would endure in case she stayed with Anthony. They have walked together “the narrow path, unable to risk a glance to right or left. Now, they stood in a flat and featureless plain, older, wiser, but somehow diminished” (Drabble, 2013, p. 180). Finally, she decides: “I do not want Anthony to kill himself. We must be able to work out some better way of living” (Drabble, 2013, p. 183). That is what Agamben remarks as “The singularity exposed as such is whatever you *want*, that is, lovable” (Agamben, 1990, p. 2).

For Agamben (1985), the idea of love is something like the following experience: “To live in intimacy with a stranger, not in order to draw him closer, or to make him known, but rather to keep him strange, remote: unapparent” (Agamben, 1985, p. 6). It is this way that individuals, falling in love, experience the mentioned strangeness and remoteness and gain the knowledge of the self. Anthony, by means of love, at the end of the novel, seems to reach some points of knowledge and self-awareness. Alison also reaches some level of understanding of self; however, her transgression is not as visible as Anthony’s at the end of the novel. Drabble moves us “into Alison’s consciousness long enough to establish her awareness of how frail her power is in a man’s world” (Cronan Rose, 1980, p. 113). Living in a patriarchal world where women are observed as an object of desire, “for Alison Murray, beauty

had for years been identity” (Drabble, 2013, p. 94). Hence Alison, a middle-aged woman, decides to continue an intimate life with Anthony as he observes her as a companion rather than an object. In fact, the purpose of Agambenian love is that both self and other get to know themselves. This “experience of the other” or love cannot be framed to any system; in other words, this “temporal event”, being touched by love, transforms selfhood from within and it is what Agamben refers to as the souvenir of the other which is neither “present” nor anymore “available”; something that is kept as “a memory trace” (Wolfreys, 2015, pp. 48-49).

Anthony is filled with “the revelation of the self to itself in the self-showing” (Wolfreys, 2015, p. 51) that is given to him by Alison. Actually, the being in love is in a kind of quest to gain knowledge by means of which his ontology is interrupted. Anthony thinks: “I can really do without all this. I think I can manage on my own” (Drabble, 2013, p. 168). Later, in his frozen prison in Wallacia, Anthony strives to cling to life in order to survive. He is fascinated with watching birds that shows his hope for a better future, a sense of recovery. At the end of the novel, Anthony comes to terms with his unpleasant situation. On the other hand, Alison will not recover completely; she is doomed to remain dependent on others, not being able to survive without the help of a male figure. Her prison is even colder and worse than Anthony’s and hinders her from any recuperation and improvement.

Characters, portrayed in *The Ice Age*, reflect a life that ends up in misery; even love cannot save them thoroughly from their downfall. *The Ice Age* shows the collapse of culture and economy that lead to the collapse of human beings and is the sign of collective decay. “People should not get together. They are more attractive in smaller groups. Collectivity corrupts. Man is a social animal, but only at a great risk” (Drabble, 2013, p. 169). Even an emotional life cannot help them to survive in the loop of camp-like life. Even though love is a means of escape from the socio-political issues that are dominant in society, and makes life tolerable for individuals, it cannot save them completely from the turbulent modern world, a world that creates politicized homines sacri.

Homo Sacer: Excluded Existence

“You are either homo sacer or potentially homo sacer; there is no in-between” (Ek, 2006, p. 371). *The Ice Age* depicts Britain’s economic and socio-political matters and can be considered as a novel on the state of constructed identities and excluded bare lives. The novel begins with introducing Anthony Keating who has survived a heart attack. He has received a letter from a friend, Kitty Friedmann, that morning. The letter starts with this sentence: “These are terrible times we live in” (Drabble, 2013, p. 1); Anthony knows that it will be full of an “unbearable goodness, in the face of a tragedy too horrible to think of” (Drabble, 2013, p. 2); Max, Kitty’s husband has been killed and Kitty has lost a foot in a bomb incident by the I.R.A. Then, Anthony thinks about the past one year, about his own destruction due to the economic recession. The seductive profits at the time of the boom, now, have changed to his collapse at the time of the bust that is followed by a heart attack at the age of thirty-eight.

So, there it was. A terrible year, a terrible world. Two of his acquaintance in prison, one dead by assassination, himself in debt by many thousands. It had all

looked so different, four years ago, three years ago. So hopeful, so prosperous, so safe, so expansive. (Drabble, 2013, p. 14)

Actually, the novel highlights an age of artificial prosperity in which characters struggle to earn more. The bodies, entrapped in the principles of the capitalist society, turn to be *homines sacri*.

The established systems dominant in Britain such as gender, class membership, and consumerism label every individual and attribute specific traits to them. *Homo sacer* is a figure who indicates a distinction between politicized life (*bios*) and natural life (*zoe*). This distinction is considerable in the modern political condition. It is in the course of the regularization of state's power that *homo sacer* is produced and the differentiation of forms of life appears (Agamben, 1998). To elaborate more, Agamben has proposed that "the politicization of bare life ... constitutes the decisive event of modernity" (Agamben, 1998, p. 4). What is more, in modern life, in the case of political state of exception, *homo sacer* becomes the norm and people can likely be arrested, imprisoned, or executed without any trial. Related to this issue, De la Durantaye elaborates on the concept of "state of exception" in which *bios* and *zoe* are no longer separable - nor are "right and fact" - but instead enter into a "zone of irreducible indistinction". This zone of indistinction characterized by a state of exception is one in whose shadows Agamben sees the fragile figure of the *homo sacer* that plays a fundamental role-and offer a surprising paradigm. (De la Durantaye, 2009, p. 210)

Evidently, a life that is bare (naked) is what the state of exception produces. This "bare life" is neither *zoe* nor *bios*, but the intimate and indistinguishable border between them which Agamben calls "form-of-life". According to Agamben, "form-of-life" is "a life . . . in which the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply facts but always and above all possibilities of life, always and above all potentiality" (Agamben, 2000, p. 4). Related to this matter, *The Ice Age* defines the troubled state of nation: "the body is the body politic", and the novel is an attempt "to understand the pathology that afflicts late twentieth-century Britain" (Harper, 2014, p. 235). The seminal question that arises is how it is possible to form a political bare life in the modern life of Western democracy. The answer can be traced in the formation of biopolitics which means "the individual's universal right to life" (Watkin, 2014, p. 184). Actually, biopolitics localizes the bare life in the camp "where the division, the distinction and the opposition of the founding terms of politics are indistinct" (Watkin, 2014, p. 184). As Anthony thinks: "Men and women are machines" (Drabble, 2013, 179).

The terms of politics lose their meaning when they enter into the domain of biopolitics. Therefore, the distinction between democracy and totalitarianism or fascism disappears. All of them share biopolitics as their political origin. Accordingly, the production of a biopolitical body or bare life is the original activity of sovereign power (Watkin, 2014, p. 185). The same way, Anthony is directed by the dominant ideology in society; at his first stage of life, he despises money: "One had to have some to live on, of course, but one ought not to concentrate too much upon the matter" (Drabble, 2013, p. 17). Like most of art students his politics is left-

wing and he disapproves establishment and believes in equal shares of wealth among people; however, it is sovereign power that decides what is good for a living being; it becomes a power that controls bare life in any situation. According to Agamben, life is the process by which . . . the realm of bare life—which is originally situated at the margins of the political order—gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoe*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction. (Agamben, 1998, p. 9)

In this light, *homo sacer*, in the Western world, is not limited to the sphere of dictatorship but applicable to the modern democracy as well. Actually, the modern Western democracy includes sovereignty, exceptions, *homines sacri*.

The Ice Age covers the time span of the 1970s England when economic recession affects people's lives dramatically. Government, in this critical decade, regulates bodies in order to survive. It portrays the characters' different reactions as the participants of society toward the economic recession:

Not everybody in Britain on that night in November was alone, incapacitated or in jail. Nevertheless, over the country depression lay like fog, which was just about all that was missing to lower spirits even further, and there was even a little of that in East Anglia. All over the nation, families who had listened to the news looked at one another and said, "Goodness me", or "Whatever next", or "I give up", or "Well, fuck that", before embarking on an evening's viewing of colour television, or a large hot meal, or a trip to the pub, or a choral society evening. (Drabble, 2013, p. 59)

The ways characters are developed in the course of the novel "signal a change in the structure of British society, and its overview of itself, but the development - and self-reflection - of each character pushes along the same path" (Duran, 2006, p. 41). The structure of British society leads characters to act and experience new ways and in doing so endure lots of hardships. Anthony, an educated middle-class individual, decides to change his standard of existence to a risk-taking financial path of property developer that eventually brings him close to physical and financial ruin.

The change in his lifestyle and career changes Anthony's manner, too. Now he is a money-minded man who after visiting his old friends feels he has no longer any thing in common with them and their social class. Actually, he moves to "a state classlessness" with a "love of moneymaking" that is in contrary with the genteel styling of his upbringing and those who were brought up in the same milieu. Incredibly enough, as Anthony reflects, all of these changes had happened to Britain and her citizens within the course of a very short period of time. (Duran, 2006, p. 41)

Anthony, being brought up and educated in old British culture and society, now, confronting this shabby culture, transforms into a bored and a "restless Londoner". It is in this context that we see Agamben's argument gaining ground where he points to the state of classless society, *petti bourgeoisie*, as the product of capitalism. Individuals feel lost and fallen apart from the standards of the past followed by a moneymaking community most of whose plans are illegal. Anthony within a decade turns from a middle-class civil servant to a classless *petti*

bourgeoisie. And as Duran elaborates, “The newer British history is a potpourri and hodgepodge of classes, races, genders, and creeds. Drabble captures all of this in *The Ice Age*” (Duran, 2006, p. 44). Absolutely, man turns to be a plaything in the hands of political, cultural, and economic changes in Britain.

Incited by what surrounds Britain, Anthony criticizes himself and his middle-class generation for having failed to accomplish “the new bright classless enterprising future of Great Britain” (Drabble, 2013, p. 259), and resolves that “[they] had produced no new images, no new style, merely a cheap strained exhausted imitation of the old one. Nothing had changed” (Drabble, 2013, p. 259). Considering the camp-like life in modern society, man endures a life which has no political significance; in fact, he is beyond the law and cannot represent himself. It is in this zone that man experiences the indistinction between zoe and bios, life and death, and survivor and victim. Actually, man, feeling included in social life, turns to be an excluded existence, a being devoid of identity in a collective sense. It is exactly the zone that one cannot distinguish between democracy and totalitarianism in modern life. Therefore, this camp-like life clearly explains what Agamben mentions as the paradigm of political space within which homo sacer may be mixed up with the citizen, a space where everyone is living. According to Somerton (1998), “Anthony's inability to free himself from tradition and act in new ways has dire consequences for him in Wallacia where he is first held hostage and then imprisoned” (p. 137). Obviously, “[H]e looked what he was, an English gentleman of the middle classes” (Drabble, 2013, p. 282) who has only “old-world possibilities” to descend on (Drabble, 2013, p. 283).

Apparently, a series of decisions are made to bound and define this politicized life and every society regulates the limits as a result of which bare life appears. As Agamben argues, “every society – even the most modern – decides who its ‘sacred men’ will be” (Agamben, 1998, p. 139). Politics, concerned with bare life (unpolitical life), creates a space (camp) in which bare life and the state of exception enter into a verge of indistinction and proves that every one finds himself in a camp regardless to the kinds of crime they have committed. In fact, the camp is the hidden form of politics in which we are living and this structure is recognized everywhere in our city with all its metamorphoses (Agamben, 1998, p. 175). In this manner, in the camp of British society and in a time of economic recession, people turn into a constructed bare life. Anthony having tried different ways, some of them illegal, exercises moneymaking system to get what he wishes; however, this system brings him down from the state of transient prosperity to that of adversity, and by selling his property, he escapes prison. Along with Alison, his only companion, he lives in their country house:

they were alone, in a desert of their own making, in their own fortress. Anthony Keating, man of leisure, in his country house, and Alison Murray, ex-actress, ex-mother, unemployed. It could not go on like this forever, but what next, what next, what next. (Drabble, 2013, p. 181)

Eventually, the economic recession of Britain leads him to be abandoned as a bare life, yet it is not all. It is followed by another form, political one, in Wallacia

where he finds himself behind the cell bars. Humphrey Clegg encourages him to go and bring Jane, his step daughter, back from Wallacia, and “that was how Anthony Keating became a British spy” (Drabble, 2013, p. 196). Anthony, never having been involved in any political matters, trusts Clegg even though he is not clearly informed about the nature of his act. Anthony tries to forget the “wild surmise, that the whole affair was a gigantic fake, that Humphrey Clegg was some kind of double agent, that nobody had ever had the slightest intention of releasing Jane Murray” (Drabble, 2013, p. 197). Finally, Anthony decides to travel there; he is able to save Jane and sends her back home, but in exchange for his imprisonment in Plevesti camp. It is exactly the incident that turns him into a homo sacer. His life, now, is a constructed bare life in the camp. There, he has time to think about his past - the society and organizations - such as public school, Oxbridge, the BBC, and ITV that conditioned his life:

This was the new line of the new Anthony, Oxbridge Arts graduate turned property dealer. In the early seventies, he no longer woke up in the small hours asking himself, What is it? What is what? He was usually too tired to wake, and when he did, he occasionally asked himself with horror, What on earth have I done? It seemed a better question. At least he had done something. He had made thousands of pounds, but had borrowed many thousands more. He had tackled the modern capitalist economy. He was a modern man, an operator, at one with the spirit of the age. (Drabble, 2013, p. 28)

With regard to the organizations whose aim is to abandon citizens to excluded existence, Anthony, in the course of his life, perceives that his education in Oxbridge has “conditioned” him to conduct in “the world that had gone” (Drabble, 2013, p. 259). He considers himself as “a child of lost empire, disinherited” (Drabble, 2013, p. 260). And for that reason, he is not able to handle the crisis of this lost empire. Somerton elaborates on this matter and mentions,

Anthony himself is aware that he ends up imprisoned in a foreign country because his class and education conditioned him for “the world that has gone”. What he does not seem aware of is that his nationality may be perceived as reason enough to keep him imprisoned. (Somerton, 1998, p. 140)

On account of his nationality, Anthony endures the unpleasant behavior of his fellow prisoners which seems to be “as revenge for England’s past arrogance in claiming not only material but moral superiority for itself”. Actually, “British people were now tried and imprisoned in countries that had been British colonies” (Somerton, 1998, p. 140). Not only is Anthony turned into a homo sacer, an excluded existence, by his own paradigmatic camp-like society, but also he experiences the unpleasant exclusion in a real camp in Wallacia. Anthony, as a tragic character, promotes self-awareness when he is carried from one camp to another and is posed into various public and private situations. However, his final scene depicts he has a desire towards happy life.

The state of exception in modern world day after day strips man of all their civil liberties and provides man a life analogous to concentrated camp; it also deprives them of sociopolitical identity, of human rights, and as a result is abandoned to be the bare life. As human rights are the rights of the citizen rather

than the rights of the homo sacer, the sovereign power, which is the legal power, will decide on the distinction between the two. Therefore, homo sacer is a being who seems not to be separated from the nation but bereaved of his rights. *The Ice Age* intensifies a society in which “all over the country, people blamed other people for all the things that were going wrong—the trades unions, the present government, the miners, the car workers, the Arabs, The Irish” (Drabble, 2013, p. 50), and Drabble identifies England as transforming “into a shabby country” (Drabble, 2013, p. 31).

Evidently, a form-of-life is a style of life in which bare life is undistinguished and undistinguishable; it characterizes a condition of immediate contact between the body and what destroys it, a condition in which “power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation” (Agamben, 2000, p. 171). Anthony, as an exemplar of constructed bare life in society, can be generalized to all characters in the novel and, taken in a broad sense, to all humanity. In this way, in the circumstances of modernity, the destruction of bare lives is not condemned; indeed, the bareness of the bodies is left to the sovereign power to be led to a form-of-life. Thus, the notion of the form-of-life is a counter-figure to the notion of bare life; capitalism is one of the forces that produces and exploits bare lives, so it seems to be inspired by a natural life, zoe, which would also be a politically qualified life, bios. Eventually, examining these criteria show how the categories of bare life and the use of bodies fail to live up to their promise of happy life.

Conclusion

In the present paper, Margaret Drabble’s novel, *The Ice Age*, was analyzed to inspect what aspects of the novel may associate with Agamben’s concepts of love and homo sacer. It also constructs an extended understanding of Giorgio Agamben’s philosophy applicable in the period of the 1970s Britain in order to provide readers with new observations into this novel. Based on these ideas, the characters of Anthony and Alison are evaluated based on Agambenian love to see to what extent they gain self-awareness. Also, the nature of homo sacer is noticed to explicate dominant view of individuals along with concepts such as identity, self, and autonomy to name some of them. Moreover, the distinguishing and the prominent family issues in *The Ice Age*, encountering both male and female characters, consider the educational, socio-political, and judicial systems that can be connected to the concept of homo sacer.

All in all, *The Ice Age* illustrates the individuals whose success and failure depend upon limited number of potentialities. In every step of analysis, excluded existence is the sole guidance to the methodology of this study. It requires that every existence must be approached in a way that portrays itself as a constructed bare life. The goal is to show that a constructed bare life is the transformation of zoe and bios within the state of exception ruled by the sovereign power. The characters find themselves caught in a limiting network of the financial status, the class membership, the family relationships, and, the most important of all, the authoritative organizations. Actually, the protagonists try to reestablish their form-of-life; they strive hard to survive; they attempt to get along with the social crises affecting Britain and also with the class distinction and social status imposed upon them by the sovereign power. *The Ice Age* concludes with neither happy ending of

the recovery of her characters and of England nor sad ending of inevitable downfall of them. Apparently, the subjects' actual self never appears; what remains of them is a kind of bare life, homo sacer, that can be generalized to all humanity within the camp of Britain.

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