

# Narrative of Obsession: Manipulated Identities, Labyrinthine Emotions in Iris Murdoch's *A Word Child*

Nazila Herischian<sup>1</sup>

PhD Candidate, Department of English, Tabriz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, Iran.

Seyed Majid Alavi Shooshtari (Corresponding Author)<sup>2</sup>

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Tabriz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, Iran.

Naser Motallebzadeh<sup>3</sup>

Associate Professor, Department of English, Tabriz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, Iran.

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## Abstract

The theoretical discussion of the present paper is particularly based on the insights of Giorgio Agamben contextualized in Iris Murdoch's novel, *A Word Child* (1975), written in the transitional period of the seventies England. It will inspect Agamben's biopolitical insights to examine how they may contribute to understanding of the dark side of sovereignty considering the figure of a banished individual. Taking the precariousness of the emotional, political and ontological faculties of 'love', 'homo sacer' and 'bare life' allocated to the human being in Murdoch's novel, *A Word Child*, this paper offers a different view of Murdoch's inspirational emphatic love, socio-political abstruse problems in her novel arguing that Agamben's account of these issues supplies an underlying structure of the form-of-life. It resounds through Agamben's view as a never-ending struggle of human beings to underpin the messiness and cruelty of life in which characters are emotionally engaged and entrapped in order to examine some potentialities as the escape routes from the prevailing deadlocks of the era and eventually to trace, according to Agamben, a form-of-life that is called a happy life.

## Keywords

Agambenian Love; Whatever Being; Homo Sacer; Bare Life; Form-of-Life.

## 1. Introduction

Literary texts are inseparable from the social and political contexts in which they are produced. One of the controversial contexts in British history is the seventies, an era that a sense of ending prevailed. Along with the alternative female voices who address the ontological deadlocks of society, the seventies is the age of new insights of redefining man's position within the society. Iris Murdoch is considered as one of these prominent voices to react against the socio-political and cultural disorders in the troublesome seventies. Taking into account the socio-political context of the 1970s, it is remembered as a decade of embarrassment and tastelessness, a period of repression and difficulty. It, at the same time, is a decade of colossal heterogeneity in almost every domain including

<sup>1</sup> [nazila.herischian@yahoo.com](mailto:nazila.herischian@yahoo.com)

<sup>2</sup> [majidalavi@iaut.ac.ir](mailto:majidalavi@iaut.ac.ir)

<sup>3</sup> [naser\\_motallebzadeh@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:naser_motallebzadeh@yahoo.co.uk)

concerns about class, race and gender. There is also intimate interaction of economics, politics and cultural opinions. Needless to say, the position of women in social and political matters and even private life has always been liable to controversial debates throughout history. A sense of the urgency of the problems facing women culminates in the seventies and leads to everlasting social and political changes for women. The most important social change that women confront, as Jeremy Black states, is termed 'consciousness raising' that is a feature of the diverse 'women's liberation' movement (115). This movement agrees four main demands of "equal education and opportunity, equal pay, free and automatically available contraception and abortion, and widespread nursery provision" (116).

The same way, there are some radical changes in the subject matter some novelists decide to use in their novels. In truth, they refuse to judge their characters, and in some instances approve bad manners such as drinking, womanizing and fist fights. Rather, as Richard Bradford asserts, "it was a new, unprecedented form of realism in which the author no longer felt beholden to any fixed or determining set of social or ethical mores" (9). It is very significant as these novelists can be considered "as establishing a precedent for a considerable number of later twentieth-century novelists who present society and its ills" (9). Apparently, it can be suggested that their art plays a very large role in the social and cultural changes. That is to say, their novels largely deal with a range of characters and social settings and have a backdrop of public events and cultural references via which social and political transformations of a country are reflected. They interweave public and private life of their readers either directly by using some markers of the decade, or indirectly in a more subtle way of sociocultural references and play a very large role in the socio-cultural changes.

As a novelist, Iris Murdoch writes exhaustively on the subjects of contemporary concern in post-war England. Her works provide a wealth of information about the changing nature of English society and culture, portraying the disquieting and confusing face of England in the transitional period of the 70s. It is through the remarkable works, written in this decade, that Murdoch deals with different aspects of life with the aim of highlighting socio-political order. Murdoch herself in an interview mentioned that "the writer's first duty is to his art but that he also has a duty to be active in the politics of his country" (qtd. in Martin 98). As stated before, the importance of the theme of love for Murdoch is noticeable and as a philosopher her views on love are worth focusing. In her essay, 'On "God" and "Good"', Murdoch writes that "we need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central" (qtd in Hopwood 478). Murdoch's account of love is something like to

revive the Platonic notion of eros that is completely different from Agambenian love adverted in this paper. Murdoch, that is to say, is making a self-conscious effort to show that moral progress is associated with the development of erotic love. Associating 'eros' with sexual love, Murdoch—like Plato—takes it to have a significance that goes far beyond sexual or romantic relationships (Hopwood 478).

Taking into account all these dominant issues in the seventies, this paper intends to revive the literary and cultural views of this decade concentrating on one of the most debated woman novelists, Iris Murdoch, scrutinizing her novel *A Word Child* (1975). It also focuses on her style and strategies to see how she politicizes and revitalizes her literary work. Indeed, the way Murdoch attempts to announce the cultural, social and political contexts of the seventies might well reflect the way her identity is formed and founded within the same underlying structures. The argument advanced in the paper begins by observing how Murdoch's voice in her novel accords with some methodological statements and highly sophisticated insights of Giorgio Agamben such as the relation between life and form. In order to accomplish this matter, a widely discussed and praised Italian thinker, Agamben whose key terms such as, 'love', 'homo sacer' and 'bare life' have been used in political, philosophical, sociological, literary and legal issues are considered as efficient tools for excavating the textual output of the novel under study. Apparently, Murdoch's focus is mostly confined to the personal and emotional struggles of the individual in the chaotic world around him and this article aims to dissect these emotions under the light of Agambenian love to see whether it will act as a loophole to lead them to a happy life. This vulnerable individual, struggling to survive, practices different ways one of which is love, but via social conventions and political structures is evidently transformed to a form of being that in Agamben's view is called *homo sacer*. In fact, some social and political crises lead him to a camp-like life in which he is condemned to a constructed bare life that may banish him of a form-of-life that is happy life.

## 2. Review of Literature

Murdoch, discussing love or eros, gives an account of a 'fundamental form of moral awareness that colors all of our relations with others'. Indeed, 'eros is arguably the most fundamental form of moral awareness' for her. As Mark Hopwood elaborates on Murdochian love, "It is eros that is responsible for our sense of being subject to a normative demand imposed upon us from outside the self: what Murdoch memorably describes as 'the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real'" (478). He also suggests, one cannot understand Murdoch except in the way that she presents herself: i.e., "as a Platonist" (483). Meticulously structured study of the precise

nature of what she conceives of love reveals a kind of attention to individuals. Respect to the individual is a part of her philosophy of love. On Murdoch's view, eros has two objects: "the particular individual and the good" which are connected, however: "Eros is always directed toward both of them at the same time". in fact, "We love particular individuals in the light of the good, and we love the good through particular individuals" (486).

Throughout history, love has been one of the integral subject matters in the novels because love is considered as essential and emotional survival and also the most powerful emotion an individual can experience in life. In other words, intimate love is the evidence of personal relevance and of one's existence. However, Agambenian 'love' is so strange and difficult a term to define. Every thinker, based on his/her insights, provides a peculiar definition of love. Giorgio Agamben, one of the leading figures in Italian philosophy and radical political theory, is also engaged with the term 'love' and is concerned with its consequences in individual's personal and social life. Love can be traced everywhere in Agamben's writings, however, the love that Agamben defines is completely different from what we assume as one. It should not be confused with either 'desire or any erotism'. The concept of the 'other', noticed by most of thinkers in various concepts as gender, ethnicity, sexual identity, orientation and ontology, is also a prominent 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, another self already" (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', a topic, ignored and avoided by most philosophers as love is not a matter of philosophy. It is a sign, something beyond the bulk of philosophy. Love, in some ways, haunts, conditions and transmits philosophy, therefore, none of philosophical constitutions can find center in the domain of love. The discourse of philosophy is always interrupted and disrupted by 'phantasmatic nature' of love. Wolfreys considers love as something in relation to the other and refers to Giorgio Agamben's definition of love as, "seeing something simply in its being-thus – irreparable, but not for that reason necessary; thus, but not for that reason contingent – is love" (47).

Also, in *The Use of Body: Homo sacer*, 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 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*" (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" (207).

### 3. Discussion

As a philosopher, novelist and to some extent social critic, Iris Murdoch writes exhaustively on the subjects of contemporary concerns and her works provide a wealth of information about the changing nature of English society and lifestyle, portraying the disquieting and confusing face of England particularly in the seventies. Actually, Murdoch becomes the voice of her fictional characters in order to highlight the ways through which this individuals' social, sexual and economic status reflects and/or rejects the factional deadlocks of the decade. Taking the precariousness of the emotional, political and ontological faculties of 'love', 'homo sacer' and constructed 'bare life' allocated to the human being in her novel, *A Word Child*, written in this challenging decade is this paper's focal point. It examines the relationship between Murdoch's view of emphatic love, socio-political abstruse problems in her novel and evidence provided by Agamben on these issues. It resounds through Agamben's view as a never-ending struggle of human beings to underpin the messiness and cruelty of life in which characters are emotionally engaged or entrapped to examine some possible escape routes from the prevailing deadlocks of the seventies.

#### 3.1. Agambenian Love: Profane Love that Repeats Itself

It is plausible to contemplate Agamben's writing on love as his efforts to take back it to the sphere of human means and to separate it from the realm of divine or as he mentions to 'profane' it, to reduce it from other-worldliness to human sphere. Agamben, somehow, generates a form of love that diverge from the Christian tradition and takes up its ultimate place. Specifically, as Parsley elaborates on Agamben's prediction on love, he states that there is no crystal clear 'universal/particular distinction' and 'the dialectic of the proper and improper'; he, then, continues, "only by recourse to a particular understanding of the image and the gaze that somehow remains available as part of the human experience of love despite having its origins, for Agamben, in the phantasm of medieval thought" (36). Related to this account, *A Word Child*, may be considered as a more seminal and dramatic work concerning the issue of love. The novel is Murdoch's literary work that seems to bridge elite and mass cultures to make situations and events

more understandable. The author shows the protagonist's spiritual growth in a painful and complicated way to make him cope with his obsessional feelings via which Murdoch reacts to the surrounding world.

Hilary Burde is a spiritually injured child, from an impoverished and fragmented family, who works his way from orphanage into Oxford. In Oxford, his only friend is Gunnar Jopling who shows great concern for him. Hilary, being deprived of affection in his life, says, "I was not, except in some very broken-down sense of that ambiguous term, a love child" (*A Word Child* 21), hence, he has an overwhelming passion and desire to be loved, he enters Jopling's life as "a cruel ruthless invader" (228), falls in love with his first wife, Anne. Hilary, in his memories, describes Anne as having "the most beautiful human face" though not regarded as good looking. "I fell in love with Ann, ... because those shining clever gentle eyes somehow, and from the very first moment, looked right into my soul and I felt myself *known* for the first time in my life" (116). Apparently, it is the secrecy of love that makes it more charming. The mood or the souvenir of love, the space through which he traces, transforms Hilary's knowledge about himself. The space and time lose their existence for him and as he does not attempt to reveal his 'extraordinary condition', he "feels free to enjoy it privately, to experience that amazing enlargement of the world, its mythical transformation, its beatification, which being in love brings about" (117).

Agamben in *Infancy and History* approves Walter Benjamin's statement of the death of experience and having mediated between 'experience and knowledge', he deals with the case of love, considering Eros and its image, declares that the true object of desire is not corporeality, the 'immediate sensory thing', but the phantasm (29). In order to understand this claim, Parsley proclaims that,

It is important to grasp how Agamben's thought of the political subject is conditioned by the conjunction of love and the image in the amorous *copulatio* of 'phantasms with the "possible intellect"'. In its guise as 'whatever being' taking place in the gaze of the lover, or indeed the Pauline 'remnant', this subject is always undergirded by Agamben's diagnosis of the condition of the modern speaking subject, the revivification of the imagination as the indelible condition of its existence, and the image-substantialization that the gaze of love works upon the 'identity' of the beloved (37).

Love encounters in the gaze of the other and the experience of its taking-place disappears immediately. What occurs after that moment is just the endless efforts of the self to repeat, and re-experience that state. Hilary says:

Hell really began after that. ... I continued to teach and to eat, but I did these things in a coma, ... I did not reflect or speculate or make plans. I just suffered blankly from Anne's absence, ... There was nothing else but this pain. Then one morning, again about eleven o'clock, she suddenly entered my room (*A Word Child* 119).

Ethics of love in Christianity are the ethics of the love of God and the love of humanity whose political mission Agamben considers as failed. In this light, Agamben returns 'to love as *Eros*', something that is 'the passionate love of the Good'. However, this paradoxical idea is not an alternative choice of the tradition. "Rather, Agamben enlists *Eros* precisely to do *Agape's* work, by installing a specific interpretation of *Eros* into the very place reserved for *Agape* by Christian theology" (Parsley 33). What is at issue in this case is that Agamben's love here is love as *Eros*, something that is referred to in medieval philosophy and love poetry, by means of which he tries to mend the split in modern world. The moment Anne kisses him on the lips, Hilary holds "her there in a blind ecstasy of motionless passion" (*A Word Child* 118). Not having any emotional relationships before, Hilary is not able to show a sound affection and what he wants is the sexual love affair as he himself refers to it as "a pretty heartless business". Anne feels sorry for him for his severe past, she feels "the grains of violence" in him and "yearns over them". She decides to familiarize Hilary how to communicate, she "bathes his hurt soul in a reviving dew" as if being "seen by God". Though "pity changes imperceptibly into enslaving fascination" (*A Word Child* 122). This chaos and blurry line that is created between divine selfless love and narcissistic selfish love ends in its tragic destruction. Hilary recklessly drives the car in which she and her unborn child are killed when she threatens to abandon him and stay with Jopling.

Although Hilary is "crashed and unmanned for years", he experienced neither repentance nor redemptive suffering, but simply grieved over his unfulfilled hopes; he re-enters his cage, loses his "moral self-respect and with it his ability to control his life". He believes that the tragedy did not "redeem" him, it just "weakened him further" (*A Word Child* 126); not being able to take the responsibility of his actions results in the destruction of his hopes and his loss of desired identity, and makes recluses of himself and his sister, Crystal. Now, after twenty years, it seems that he has fallen in the same loop that locks the chain. As if there is a cyclic function of time and life that repeats itself under the name of love. Gunnar Jopling unexpectedly becomes the chairman at the office where Hilary works. Lady Kitty, Gunnar's new wife, meets Hilary several times asking him to help her to 'cure' Gunnar of his distressful past. Hilary in a desperate hope for reunion admits her proposal. Yet, he fatally falls in love with Kitty.

In *The Coming Community*, Agamben proposes the ‘whatever being’ as a singularity not having a property or not “belonging to this or that set, to this or that class” (1), but as it is clear, Agamben's strategy may not be considered merely as that whatever being is not simply without belonging, rather it is for its own ‘*being-such*, for belonging itself’. And the paradigm of the emergence of this singularity is the beloved in the gaze of the lover. This time, it is Lady Kitty who proposes a secret love affair; Hilary, despite a huge social class difference, falls in love with her. When he visits Kitty in her house he says, “I stared at that face, and the universe seemed to circle round quickly like a great bird and come to rest” (*A Word Child* 309). Agambenian love “is never directed to this or that property of the loved one”; however, he continues, “the lover wants the loved one *with all of its predicates*, its being such as it is. The lover desires the *as* only insofar as it is *such* - this is the lover's particular fetishism” (2). Being fallen in love, Hilary is again in a vicious circle of love. He says, “I had not for a second stopped thinking about Kitty. The thought of her now filled out about me like a great vibrating sphere” (*A Word Child* 322).

It is in the face of the aristocratic Lady Kitty and her luxurious life, minks, perfumes, and stylish clothes which Hilary wants to find his own self mirrored, his lost identity. Love is a phantasmatic process with “heroic demonic dimension” that “preconditions knowledge” and makes the access of truth available. Love arrives from “somewhere or someone”, interrupts the self and ends in “transgression” of the self (Wolfreys 151). Hilary wretchedly confesses, “I love you, I’m terribly sorry, forgive me, ... I love you; I worship you” (*A Word Child* 313). Situated in her social organization, Lady Kitty, though being in love with Hilary, views him as an instrument. She says, “I’ve been lonely really. ... Love, I don’t mean love affairs, I mean love, has been rare in my life” (343). Related to Agambenian love De La Durantaye elaborates on it and mentions that “Agamben reminds his reader that if truth and beauty, knowledge and enjoyment, were never separated, there could be no love of one for the other” (77). Apparently, Lady Kitty manipulates Hilary’s love to achieve her dream: “We are childless and this has been a great cause of grief to us. ... Gunnar cannot have children” (*A Word Child* 344). Then, reveals her desire, “Hilary, I want you to give me a child” (345).

More obviously, as Connal Parsley claims, the problem with this universal humanity is that according to Christian theology's own assertion, it ‘is not lovable’. Universal humanity cannot be loved as to ‘love it for itself is regarded as a dangerous error’. The human, is *allowed* to be loved only in the name of God that ‘validates and verifies this love’. This type of love based on Christian theology, in this way, ‘becomes a judgment over right and wrong love, right and wrong humanity’. This largely ‘motivates Agamben's lament for the juridification of love's political possibility’ (32). Agamben’s efforts, so to



speak, to secularize and liberate the human from a sacred life whose only intent is to produce a governable bare life seems to reach to a level of indistinction from theological traditions. He paradoxically uses the means of love to develop his coming politics. Hilary clearly senses his subordinate position: “We agreed that I was just an instrument, a tool” (*A Word Child* 345). While he begs for Kitty’s love, she insists on her proposal. Hilary faces a painful moral dilemma; finally, he resolves to say goodbye to Lady Kitty forever, but history is doomed to repeat itself. That very moment Gunnar appears and starts a fight giving Hilary no chance for an explanation. Kitty, accidentally, falls into the river and dies of exposure. What is prone to conclude is that no matter what Hilary's decision would be, both women are destined to die whether Ann decides to leave Hilary, or Hilary decides to leave lady Kitty.

The prevailing view of Agambenian love and the knowledge it provides Hilary with is forgiveness. Hilary, in his childhood, considers himself unloved that has been the major source of his suffering and anger. Later, after his disastrous experiences, he understands that love has always been “an ignis fatuus”, a fatal sparkle, for him (*A word child* 213). His love for Kitty is his “song of praise to the world” (339). In the end, he comes to the conclusion that “being in love has its own certifying universality, it informs and glorifies the world with an energy which, like a drug, becomes a necessity of consciousness” (335). Hilary, via this understanding, discovers the second important secret of the universe that is forgiveness:

I could forgive. I could be forgiven. Perhaps that was the whole of it after all. Perhaps being forgiven was just forgiving only no one had ever told me. There was nothing else needful. Just to forgive. Forgiving equals being forgiven, the secret of the universe, do not whatever you do forget it. The past was folded up and in the twinkling of an eye everything had been changed and made beautiful and good (*A Word Child* 298).

Being hurled out of these cyclic experiences, in the final chapter of the novel, Hilary and his long-suffering girlfriend, Tommy, are free to begin a new phase of their relationship. Hilary has always been attracted to her more intellectual rather than emotional. He describes her as being clever, “she argued quit well, she remembered things, one had to keep one’s wits sharp, ... She was gallant and intelligent, she tried to coerce me with her words, not with her tears” (*A Word Child* 43). It seems that “this social equality does not generate the *frisson* of rivalry he feels in his relationship with Jopling’s wives, and thus his feelings were never strong enough to lead to a commitment” (Martin and Rowe 115). Apparently, Hilary’s final understanding of Tommy at the end of the book may reveal that “finally Hilary is governed more by a rational desire to live

in the present than an obsessive desire to wreak revenge for the past” (Martin and Rowe 115). They conclude that Murdoch leaves it to her reader to think the beginning of a new peaceful life for Hilary or another “re-enactment of the deadly cyclical life patterns of his youth” (115).

Defining Agambenian love, Wolfreys refers to it as something whose possibility of occurrence is not necessary for the being. Love is the name of the ‘other’; when you find yourself ‘in love’, you ‘see the other’s being in its most naked state’; 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 (48). Consequently, Being, falling in love, is interrupted, is undone and made anew via which self-showing occurs. The being does not worry about scandalous consequences or disgrace, in other words, socio-political and cultural norms that offer a finality for the being of Being forfeit their centrality because love dismantles all dominant norms in society and in the case of Iris Murdoch’s novel *A Word Child* whose major theme is love, it acts as an escape from turmoil of social life marked by Britain’s sense of ending.

### **3.2. Homo Sacer: A Bare Life Exiled to Loneliness**

What seems obvious in Murdoch’s writing is that she does not address political questions directly, her focus is mostly confined to the personal and emotional struggles of individuals in the chaotic world around them. In other words, her writing provides us with the glimpses of the power relations, and the sources of evil deeds within our lives that is a philosophy via which political insights can be generated. The key to this philosophy is tragic incidents such as those that bring the characters to their downfall and remind Murdoch’s readers of a human being’s vulnerability. Regarding this vulnerability, Cheryl Bove in her book, *Understanding Iris Murdoch*, refers to people’s loss of faith in a ‘consolation for suffering’ and in an ‘incentive for moral behavior’ in modern world and highlights Murdoch’s regrets towards this moral breakdown (7). These vulnerable individuals, struggling to survive, are evidently via social conventions and political structures transformed to a form of being that in Agamben’s view is called *homo sacer*. This part of the research intends to forge an expanded understanding of Iris Murdoch linking her fiction to Giorgio Agamben’s philosophy in the context of the seventies Britain in order to provide readers with new insights into her work. Based on this ideology, the present part aims to examine the nature of homo sacer via the patterns and structures imposed on the central character in *A word Child* to elucidate prevailing view of individuals along with notions such as identity, self and autonomy to name some of them.

What Agamben defines of homo sacer is a figure who indicates a distinction between politicized life (bios) and natural life (zoe). He also discusses that this distinction is considerable in the modern political condition. It is in the course of the regularization of the state's power that homo sacer is produced as a result of which the differentiation of forms of life appears. Related to this matter, as De Boever claims, homo sacer "is the figure that is most closely associated with bare life" (296). Apparently, Agamben notices the extremely impressive situation of present politics when he writes in *Means Without End*: "Contemporary politics is a devastating experiment that disarticulates and empties institutions and beliefs, ideologies and religions, identities and communities" (88). Sovereign power, in contemporary politics, via the state of exception - the blurry line between fact and law - leads to the creation of homo sacer, an outlawed citizen who is subject to death, that is still included within the act of exclusion in the law. Actually, homo sacer blurs the lines between the state of being an outlaw and a citizen. The sovereign power through death penalty, imprisonment, menace and banishment produces a cursed figure who is reduced to a bare life.

Notably, *A Word Child*, viewed from a theoretical perspective, is a text which could provide some insights about the nature of Agamben's subjectivity of language and its effects on a being's individuality. It portrays a character in some circumstances in which political, social and economic status in England by means of the law and dominant conventions tend to exploit his individuality. Exploiting individuality in this way blurs the border line between homo sacer and autonomous, free being. In this light, Maria Antonaccio, focusing on Murdoch's novels, refers to Murdoch's defense of the notion that individuals are creative users of language and rescue "the notion of individual consciousness from its eclipse in current thought and reclaims the idea that language is a medium of reflection" (76). The means of language used in *A Word Child* leads its reader to determine between the blurry line of political life/bare life of the central character. It also results in the awareness of the British readers who were living in a camp-like closed era of the seventies.

In *A Word Child*, Hilary Burde, the narrator, uses language as a means to reflect different aspects of his life. As the narrative opens, Hilary Burde describes the flat he lives in, with his lodger Christopher, as a "small mean nasty flatlet" (*A Word Child* 1) and then adds, "it was doubtless my own life which was small and nasty" (2). "The flat was certainly cramped and dark, looking out onto a maze of fire escapes in a sunless well. ...I had never attempted decoration, having no taste. I desired no personal objects, no 'elegance', nothing that could remind me of the past. There was nothing here to love" (2). Perceived from this opening along with the schedule-like style of narrative, the

reader soon discerns an obsessive character. Hilary Burde embodies a problematic childhood, an unloved orphan with a hideous life subjected to violence as a result of which he becomes a violent self. He writes, “I had, with my first self-consciousness, an awareness of myself as ‘bad’, a bad boy, one who had to be sent away” (17). After his mother’s death, he lived in an orphanage, separated from his beloved sister Crystal. He did not know who his father was: “I was informed, before I knew what the word meant, that my mother was a ‘tart’. It is strange to think that my father probably never knew I existed” (17).

Considering the centrality of language as a means of reflection and also salvation in this novel, Agamben’s insight on language is worth mentioning. Agamben in his book *Language and Death* refers to the ‘poverty of words’ to convey one’s true meaning and mentions there is no need to remain silent because of this poverty. He continues, “Just as the animal preserves the truth of sensuous things simply by devouring them, that is, by recognizing them as nothing, so language guards the unspeakable by speaking it, that is, by grasping it in its negativity” (13). He then indicates the unspeakable element of language and speech and states, “language has captured in itself the power of silence, and that which appeared earlier as unspeakable ‘profundity’ can be guarded (in its negative capacity) in the very heart of the word” (13). Thus “all speech speaks the ineffable. It speaks it; that is, it demonstrates it for what it is” and demonstrates its essential characteristic as the negative or ‘Nothingness’ of meaning (13). In the orphanage, this bad boy, Hilary is recognized by his schoolmaster, Mr. Osmond who discovers Hilary’s inclination for language and helps him learn different languages -Latin, French, Spanish, Greek, Russian, Italian, Turkish-, master grammar and eventually is elected to a college fellowship. “I discovered words”, writes Hilary, “and words were my salvation” (*A Word Child* 21). As Catherine Mills affirms, “Infancy is the experience from which the human subject *emerges*, since it is only in language that the subject has its ‘site and origin’” (26).

However, being a very successful linguist does not make him a very happy and successful man in his personal life. In Oxford, he is not received warmly by some of his fellows; only the young Gunnar Jopling supports him and welcomes Hilary to his home. Oxford’s conventions, the way they greet each other, their social etiquette, everything is a novelty for Hilary. Meanwhile, he makes his lifelong regrettable mistake that maims his life. He falls in love with Anne Jopling that ends in disastrous accident as a result of which Anne and her unborn child die. Entering the world of Oxford not only does ruin his life, but also causes his loss of acquired identity. In *The Coming Community*, Agamben mentions that “A being radically devoid of any representable identity would be

absolutely irrelevant to the State. This is what, in our culture, the hypocritical dogma of the sacredness of human life and the vacuous declarations of human rights are meant to hide” (86). After this disastrous incident Hilary lives a life of an exile in which the blurry line of exclusion/inclusion is indistinguishable. From a distinguished Oxfordian linguist, he is degraded to the lowest possible degree of his life.

Here two questions arise: ‘why Western politics first constitutes itself through an exclusion of bare life’ and also ‘what the relation between politics and life is by means of exclusion’. In this light, Agamben in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* elaborates on Western politics as that of bare life/ political existence, *zoe/ bios*, exclusion/ inclusion and mentions that “there is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion” (7-8). For most of the narrative the reader is with Hilary long after the events at Oxford presenting himself as a failure. It seems that words did not save him after all. He is a low-level civil servant, a job that requires very little of his talents. He leads a poor life and deliberately makes his sister Crystal and his lover Tommy suffer with him. It is a real surprise that he has some other friends whom he meets at assigned time every week. He likes, typical to his manner, to control everyone even his narrative. He is a different person with each friend. He is so obsessed with his scheduled routine that whenever his friends see him at the wrong place or the time when they are not scheduled, he gets frustrated. “I liked to live in other people’s worlds and have none of my own” (*A Word Child* 27).

A meticulous study of subtle aspects of Hilary’s life at Oxford and England’s society leads to derive the roots of his failure that condemns him as a homo sacer. Peter Joyce focuses on young middle-class people involved in counter-cultural protests. These young people were from middle-class backgrounds, well-educated but were economically ‘decommodified’ which means could not expect ‘security of employment’. These people, as Joyce maintains, “were dubbed the ‘educated underclass’ in that they possessed ‘cultural capital’ but subsisted on very low incomes and were sceptical of the ability of current political and economic structures to solve individual or global problems” (32). These lines clearly define the unstable situation of underclass section due to the dominant conventions of politics, economics and culture in English society that Hilary at Oxford can be considered as one of them. Murdoch herself, before the publication of *A Word Child*, in April 1974 published an article, “Doing Down the Able Child: A Socialist Case for Saving our Grammar Schools” supporting the continuation of the grammar schools seems that in her novel she subjects the system itself.

In this case, Paricilla Martin and Anne Rowe elaborate on this matter and state, “Now, by the early 1970s the effects of the 1944 Butler Education Act meant that underprivileged youngsters had more chances to participate in higher education than ever before” (108). Hilary, the Oxford-educated, is an example, he says, “I went to Oxford. No child from school had ever been farther afield than a northern polytechnic” (*A Word Child* 23). Martin and Rowe continue, “Yet although the revolutionary goal of the Butler Act was to close the gap between social classes, higher education itself only served to increase working-class awareness of its difference from those born into more privileged backgrounds” (108). Hilary strives to overcome his inferiority, to fill the unfathomable gap between his class and that of privileged ones, yet it seems impossible. After the horrendous incident at Oxford that ends in his resignation and parting from his ambitions, Hilary understands that it is somehow impossible to bridge the gap. He, dangling between natural life (*zoe*) and political life (*bios*), experiences a bare life, the worst type of life.

He withdraws to his locked loneliness, works as an inferior civil servant and dwells a mechanical life. Hilary says, “My days were a routine, and in the office, I conceived of myself as far as possible as a man on an assembly line. Week-ends and holidays were hells of freedom. I took my leave for fear of comment and simply hid” (*A Word Child* 27). Accordingly, Agamben’s conception of life is a form-of-life that refers to the two opposed conception of ‘life’ as the blissful desire to existence and ‘form’ or ‘rule’ as the lifeless law of existence. In this account, Ian Hunter suggests, “in Agamben’s pairing of life and rule the whole point of the construction is to prepare an aporia or paradox on the basis of which the terms can enter a space of mutual transformation, or what Agamben calls a ‘zone of indetermination’ or ‘threshold of indifference’” (143). Hilary sustains the image of himself and his fellow workers in the office as captives; in fact, his attitude towards his job is a form of imprisonment: “I did not invent rules, I merely applied rules made by others” (*A Word Child* 28), or “In our daily bondage what can be more preoccupying and ultimately influential than the voices of our fellow captives? How they go on and on: nothing perhaps, in sheer quantity, so fills up the head” (33).

It is, evidently, the conventions dominant in society that make Hilary the prisoner of his own mind. As Hunter affirms, “Agamben introduces the later opposition between life and rule in the form of an opposition between animate life and ‘political life’, with the former nominated by the Greek *zoe*, or the urge to life of living beings, and the latter by *bios*, understood as life shaped by policy and society” (143). He feels desperate after his past incident and hides his past from everyone; he leads an invisible secluded life in spite of his linguistic talent. He wanders around London just visiting the same locations as if

an invisible hand restricts or controls his movements. He describes his wandering in London streets as being accompanied by some other miserable bodies. He says, "I was not the only Circle rider. There were others, especially in winter. Homeless people, lonely people, alcoholics, people on drugs, people in despair" (*A Word Child* 38). Moreover, Hilary's daily routine is based on a schedule freeing him from the hell of brooding over his past mistakes; each day of week is prescribed for a specific member of acquaintances. He is a frustrated man who leads an aimless, miserable life.

This restricted, mechanical way of life becomes more evident when after twenty years Gunnar appears in his life as the new head of his department. This time Gunnar's wife, Lady Kitty, in hope of solving Gunnar's psychological or better to say spiritual problems takes advantage of Hilary to fulfill her intentions. She describes her married life as something 'crippled'. She asks Hilary to help Gunnar 'let go of past' to be able "to come forward into the future with me with a whole heart" (*A Word Child* 241). Though the problem is that Hilary himself being already a homo sacer, a mechanical being, has no means to free either Gunnar or himself from the past. Cheryl Bove elaborates on this matter and states, Hilary "will continue the cycle in his responsibility for Lady Kitty's death. Bereft of love as a child, he communicates in a way that is merely mechanical; he cannot establish any relations with Gunnar, and his attempts to do so through Lady Kitty are misinterpreted" (10). Lady Kitty inspires a powerful erotic feeling in Hilary. The outcome is the repetition of the same past and as David Gordon claims, "the dark emotions of a troubled self are mostly illusory"; he continues "Being healed of obsession thus yields insight into an ethical paradox: Hilary can be more truly responsible, more attentive to others, when he understands the illusoriness, or arrogance, of assuming total personal responsibility for his actions" (151).

As mentioned before, most of Hilary's present problems directing him to lead a bare life can be traced in his childhood. Having lost his mother at a very young age, being deprived of any warm emotion, being judged and misbehaved by society have a far-reaching impact on Hilary. He is unable to use language properly and to communicate with others. Agamben, in this light, in *Infancy and History* claims the experience of 'infancy' as understood as a mute, speechless phase (taking its obsolete Italian meaning) that precedes the human being's speaking phase. Consequently, when Agamben talks about human infants, he indicates a being who does not have the capacity to speak, but have to learn this capacity (qtd. in Mills 24). Catherine Mills elaborates on the necessity of learning to speak and declares: "humans do not have a natural 'voice' in the way that animals do. While animals have an immediate relation to voice in chirping, bleating or barking, human beings have no such voice. Instead, they are deprived of voice and must acquire speech; and it is in this need to acquire speech, to enter into discourse, that the

experience of infancy subsists” (24). When the human being enters the phase of speech and is able to communicate by using language, the individual loses touch with the speechless phase of language. But as Mills continues, “this losing touch or fall from infancy does not happen once and for all, since the wordless condition of infancy resides in every utterance; infancy coexists with language and is expropriated or set aside by it in the moment of the appropriation of language in discourse” (25).

Contemplating Hilary’s childhood, it is severe to understand that the morality in the world is made of words. Using some sentences, specifically negative ones, sums up the status of a small child. Children before mastering their own language, are usually judged by others before being able to defend themselves. They are the object of unfair description, similarly, Hilary, as a child, is labeled by negative traits that lead him to use violent and harsh words; he possesses no vocabulary to express himself. The salvation needed, is later provided for him by Mr. Osmond who notices him, protects him and cares about him. He teaches Hilary the words that fight with the violent ones (words). It seems to be kind of salvation by words. Hilary describes his relation with Mr. Osmond as something nourishing. He considers himself as someone rarely ‘a love child’ but ‘a word child’ (*A Word Child* 21). Learning grammar arouses admiration in him and teaches him order.

Apparently, infancy for Agamben is “the experience from which the human subject *emerges*, since it is only in language that the subject has its ‘site and origin’. Thus, the recuperation of experience in infancy entails a radical rethinking of consciousness or subjectivity as a question of language rather than of any kind of substantive psychological being” (Mills 26). Agamben, then, claims that the only way to comprehend subjectivity is through the emergence of language, in this way “the individual is constituted as a subject. Subjectivity is nothing other than the speaker’s capacity to posit him or herself as an *ego*, and cannot in any way be defined through some wordless sense of being oneself, nor by deferral to some ineffable psychic experience of the *ego*” (qtd. in Mills 26). Therefore, it can be conceived that the subjectivity of any individual is directly related to their capacity to use language. Hilary being noticed and educated by Mr. Osmond masters many languages and linguistic structures; he wins many competitions, yet the problem is that he is not eager to use them as a means of communication. He says, “I loved words, but I was not a word-user, rather a word-watcher, ... I loved languages but I knew by now that I would never speak the languages that I read” (*A Word Child* 28). It implies that his life has been one of bare life since his childhood. He continues, “My days gave me identity, a sort of eco-skeleton. Beyond my routine chaos began and without routine my life (perhaps any life?) was a phantasmagoria” (28).



In learning languages, Hilary was not interested in how much people's lives are affected by words, he was interested in abstracted words with no social, cultural and political order. Agamben in *Profanations* pinpoints the capitalist system and its apparatuses; he claims, "In its extreme phase, capitalism is nothing but a gigantic apparatus for capturing pure means, that is, profanatory behaviors" (87). Then he refers to language as a pure means of capitalism, "as a means for diffusing its own ideology and inducing voluntary obedience" (88). However, he mentions that today this instrumental function that is effective in the state of exception gives up its place to a different means of control, that is using language in its 'possible profanatory potential'. He adds, "More essential than the function of propaganda, which views language as an instrument directed toward an end, is the capture and neutralization of the pure means par excellence, that is, language that has emancipated itself from its communicative ends and thus makes itself available for a new use" (88).

Thus, for Agamben subjectivity is only a linguistic matter. And as Mills indicates, "Subjectivity is only the constitution of consciousness in language through the appropriation of personal pronouns such as 'I' and other 'indicators of enunciation'" (26). Mills also elaborates on the concept of infancy in Agambenian vein: "the condition of infancy establishes the split between *langue* and *parole*, or between language and discourse, which, Agamben argues, is what distinguishes human language" (27). That is, it does not mean that other animals are deprived of language; on the contrary, animals are always already in language. "What is distinctive about human beings" Mills continues, "is that they must acquire speech; they must alienate their phenomenal individuality in order to appropriate the personal pronoun and become a subject in that moment of appropriation" (27). Hilary is not good at using language, he is weak in his communications. For instance, in his relation to Tommy, he says, "I could never develop a language of tenderness" (*A Word Child* 35). Agamben also writes: "Man . . . by having an infancy, by preceding speech, splits this single language and, in order to speak, has to constitute himself as a subject of language – he has to say I. Thus, if language is truly man's nature . . . then man's nature is split at its source, for infancy brings it discontinuity and difference between language and discourse" (qtd. in Mills 28). It underlines how tyranny degrades language; Hilary "likes to live in other people's worlds and have none of his own" (*A Word Child* 8).

Related to this matter, De Boever restates Agamben's insight about social status from political point of view that "Class conflict would thus become an instance of the civil war that Agamben considers to divide every people, in other words, of the practices of internal exclusion through which sovereign power biopolitically separates the People

from the people” (167). That means, sovereign power politically separates ‘citizens from second-class citizens’. Meeting Gunnar after many years, Hilary conceives that he is forever banished from their social status: “the whole extraordinary business was over. And I was back where I belonged, where my childhood had condemned me to be, alone, out in the cold without a coat” (*A Word Child* 269). The ‘zone of indeterminacy’, as Hunter claims, foreshadows a political utopia in which ‘life is not subjected to political rule’ and the latter adjusts itself to life (143). That is to say, a form-of-life is constituted in which ‘a life is seeking form, and a form or rule is inseparable from life’ (144).

These two opposed concepts of life lead Hilary to accept his inferior position to his senior ones; visiting Gunnar with Lady Kitty’s plans, he says: “the cure was not for me, nothing here was for me” (266). And Gunnar himself talks to Hilary like a master to a servant: “I don’t think I want to know about your feelings”. “He said it judiciously, not vindictively” (263). At the end of their short visit, Hilary promises Gunnar to resign. Later, Hilary describes his visit with Gunnar to Clifford as, “I behaved like an exceptionally stupid and callous zombie. He made me into one” (279). Another such event happens some days later, Laura Impiatt accuses him of being in love with her: “Hilary is in love with me”. ... “but equally of course nothing has happened since I am not the least in love with him” (318). Then she continues, “I suppose we ought to have stopped inviting him ... as soon as it was clear how he felt, but it seemed a shame to deprive him of his only really happy bit of social life” (319). In other words, everyone around Hilary uses him as a front to fulfill their wishes. Due to the class difference, they think of him as someone who does not deserve human rights, someone in a bare life position, that can be dragged in their problematic issues. Due to such ideology, the character unknowingly experiences being a homo sacer, someone whose life is underestimated.

Murdoch in *A Word Child*, a socially aware and class-conscious novel, embodies issues of class conflicts and the effects of a damaging upbringing and loss of identity and tries to reflect the dominant socio-political power in the seventies Britain. Her manner of writing clearly indicates and describes a form of life that turns the individual into a homo sacer. Actually, Hilary’s new fake identity acts as a mask that is certainly an effective disguise; it functions as a voice through which much can be said yet cannot be uttered through that voice. Hilary, using an adapted voice and not having proper words, is vulnerable to use language. Hilary is exposed to use a kind of language that does not belong to his class. He does not acquire a proper voice to utter meaning as it is not his class’s voice, it is an adopted voice given to a marginalized character who is portrayed as subordinate, submissive, and passive. He learns the mechanism of languages, becomes

‘a word child’ and finds a new but fake identity. In the class-conscious society of England, Hilary feels insecure and is afraid of making mistakes and attempts ‘to excel at everything’. He distances himself from his childhood even from his savior, Mr. Osmond. However, Hilary “is too embarrassed to speak the languages he learned so effortlessly”, too “terrified of making some memorable public blunder” to perform effectively, and remains “awkward, separatist, aggressive, touchy” (*A Word Child* 113). “Achieving a high first and being elected to a fellowship at another Oxford college does nothing to confirm his status to himself” (Martin and Rowe 110).

Hilary hates his past, he is a guilt-ridden character, suffers lack of confidence and generates an oscillation between violence and submissiveness due to which excludes himself from the most of social and cultural inclusions. Christopher truthfully mentions: “the trouble with you is that you’re a snob, it’s all that rat race competition, all that you can think of is getting away from your working-class background, you hate yourself so you can’t love anyone else” (*A Word Child* 230). Hilary in hope of being forgiven and having peace in life, finds himself by a ghostly repetition, doomed to suffer bare life unless is back to the world of his own social class. Murdoch in this novel, through creating the character of Hilary as an emblem of homo sacer and also via using language special for this character seeks a way to attract the readers’ attention to their own situation in the society of the seventies to be able to liberate them of the loop of the camp-like life.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In *A Word Child* Hilary Burde’s childhood is wrapped up in a fog of mystery, cluttered by many figures who constantly abuse him and are responsible for his emotional plight. These figures along with the dominant socio-political system act as sovereign power to destroy his life and at the same time his individuality. Considering the nature of Agamben’s subjectivity of language and its effects on a being’s individuality, the novel portrays a character in some circumstances in which political, social and economic status in England by means of laws and dominant conventions tend to exploit his individuality. Exploiting individuality in this way blurs the border line between homo sacer and autonomous, free being. Perceived from the schedule-like style of narrative, the reader soon recognizes an obsessive character. Hilary Burde embodies a problematic childhood, an unloved orphan with a hideous life subjected to violence as a result of which he becomes a violent self, a constructed bare life. In this light, the possibility of salvation through potentiality of using words seems impossible to him. He writes, “I had, with my first self-consciousness, an awareness of myself as ‘bad’, a bad boy, one who had to be sent away” (*A Word Child* 17).

In short, Murdoch being entrapped in the biopolitical sovereignty of the seventies Britain highlights the moral subjectivity in creating her novel. Moral codes that lead to subjectivity can be considered as a means to construct homo sacer and to provide a situation for sovereign power to rule a state of exception because morality itself is amenable to the law ruling the society. This dominant law (sovereign power) governs human beings and directs them inside a camp-like world. Murdoch herself, being a character in a society whose prevailing language is masculine, uses her voice to interrupt the sense of ending and to unveil the state of being a homo sacer to draw her readers' attention to the political dead end of social crises and the ways that characters may take in order to reach a form-of-life that is a happy life. Considering the concepts of love and homo sacer, through the Agambenian sieve, it is revealed that how Hilary Burde that is trapped in labyrinths of the power relations, class distinctions and social status imposed upon him by the *status quo* reacts towards predefined historical patterns of the dark decade.

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