



# Homines Sacri of Eskibahçe: An Agambenian Reading of Louis de Bernières' *Birds without Wings*

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to provide a political criticism of the 2004 novel *Birds without Wings* by the English author Louis de Bernières, as the political background and overtly political subplot of the novel render it open to one. In order to develop its own argument the study reads Bernières' novel through the political concepts of the contemporary Italian thinker Giorgio Agamben, focusing mainly on two of them that can be found in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* of Agamben, and created by the sovereign in relation with the sovereign exception or ban: The first concept is an indistinct concept of life, namely a naked or as Agamben puts it, a *bare life*. And the second is the *homo sacer (sacred man)*, the one who dwells in this naked life. Living in a small village named Eskibahçe, the characters in Louis de Bernières' novel are described as birds without wings that "are always confined to earth, no matter how much [they] climb to the high places and flap [their] arms" by the author himself (2005, p.621) and they are turned into *homines sacri (sacred men)* during a state of political emergency as the footfall of the upcoming change. Therefore, the study aims to examine all the *homines sacri* in *Birds without Wings* of Louis de Bernières by an Agambenian reading.

**Keywords:** Homo sacer, bare life, sovereign exception, Giorgio Agamben, Louis de Bernières



## Introduction

"Man is a bird without wings," says Iskander the Potter, one of the characters of Louis de Bernières's novel *Birds without Wings* (2005, p. 48). Bernières's novel was published in 2004, and is set in an imaginary Anatolian village named Eskibahçe in today's Fethiye region in Turkey. In the village, the Turks, Greeks and Armenians lived together in harmony until the period of enmity between the various ethnicities of the Ottoman Empire starting from the Balkan Wars till the end of the World Wars. The novel is, then, set in the last decades of the Empire, weakened by wars, and troubled by the atmosphere of enmity between its people. The novel's narration shifts between characters and time to provide a thorough, intertwined depiction of the individual stories of almost all the town's inhabitants.

The English novelist Louis de Bernières, known mainly as the author of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, was inspired by his grandfather who fought in the Gallipoli War of the First World War to write a novel about the war. During his visit to Turkey for further inspiration he visited Kayaköy, an Anatolian village in the Fethiye region with cobblestone alleys, located on a hillside. Kayaköy, where once thousands of Muslims and Christians lived together before the population exchange in the aftermath of the Turkish Independence War, has, unfortunately, been a ghost village since the 1930s; yet de Bernières imagines the ghosted lives of Kayaköy through his imaginary town named Eskibahçe in *Birds without Wings*. In this context, Bernières sheds light on the change from an atmosphere of harmony to one of discordance in the village in the period of numerous wars, focusing especially on the Gallipoli War. The political atmosphere of those times is interspersed among the personal stories of the characters, and is also given in the sections focusing on Mustafa Kemal. As the founder of the Turkish Republic, his story frames the novel and provides a political context.

Politics became a prominent area of thought especially after the European nationalist movement gaining its peak in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that caused different politic views among people. In the contemporary era, almost none of the discourses can be thought of as apart from politics, thus the thinkers and scholars produce new political concepts. The twentieth-century Italian thinker Giorgio Agamben is one of those contemporary thinkers who has politics as the general area of interest. He has mostly become known for his concepts of 'the sovereign exception', 'the bare life' and 'homo sacer' that are examined in his biggest project on which he has worked since

1995, and which consists of nine separate works; the *Homo Sacer*. Agamben's *homo sacer* can be compared to a bird without wings, in that in both works, the characters have to live the life and conditions that are imposed on them.

The birds without wings of Eskibahçe of de Bernières are helpless in determining their own fate as they try to cope not only with the difficult situations that are imposed upon them by the governors, such as numerous wars, but also with the imposed decisions upon their identity. It is, therefore, the political concepts of the bare life and *homo sacer* that are found in Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* that will provide an Agambenian reading of Louis de Bernières' novel *Birds without Wings* in this paper.

## Homo Sacer and the Bare Life

Agamben believes that in order to explore the politics of today, one should go back to the ancient civilisations of Greece and Rome to examine their system as they were the creators of political life. The Ancient Greeks divided life into two different categories; *zoē* and *bios* (see Agamben, 1998 "Introduction"; Aksoy, 2016; Çifçi, 2018; Fiskesjö, 2012; Woodson, 2021; Zammit, 2017). *Zoē* is life in general, in which every living creature exists. It describes a natural life that is determined by being biologically alive. On the other hand, the people of ancient Greece flourished by gathering together as a social group in a *polis* and thus conducting a basic political life; *bios*. So, the transition from *zoē* to *bios* required a political qualification. Rather than the natural life state of *zoē*, the life of *bios* constructs the state of law applicable only to humans. It is the qualified life of humankind. Aksoy describes *bios* as a political life that is dominated by political laws, rights and responsibilities, while *zoē* as a form of life that has never been able to be represented in social life and has no qualifications other than being alive (2016, p. 52). According to political philosophers such as Agamben or Derrida, the sovereign is the one who creates *bios* through his power over constructing a juridical organ (see Agamben, 1998; Derrida, 2009). Thus, the sovereign as the lawmaker creates political boundaries for the citizens, providing them both with a political identity and with protection.

However, in order to define the laws of the *bios*, the sovereign must also identify what is outside the law. For the determined *bios* to be created by the sovereign, the life of the other must also be created by the same person. Thus, to identify the outside,

the *bare life* which is a zone out of political *bios*, closer to natural *zoē* is created by the sovereign as “the originary activity of sovereignty” (Agamben, 1998, p. 53). This political act of the sovereign, declares a bare life, a naked life that is stripped from any political identity, and outside any act of protection provided by the law. Agamben describes bare life as a place of indistinction with transparent borders, both inside and outside *zoē* and *bios* (1998, pp. 52–56). Regarding this uncertain nature of the bare life, Nazif Çifçi in his article “Homo Sacer İçin Her Gün Bayram”<sup>1</sup> adds that the only distinct aspect of bare life is the power that creates it in his article. In summary, bare life is the “life of a human being alive only in a biological but not in any political sense, since he has none of the usual rights of a member of society” (Fiskesjö, 2012, p. 162).

De Bernières' Eskibahçe is an Anatolian town set in the early 1900s. At that time, the small towns in the Anatolia region were constructed in the mountain skirts, between the valleys, in vast plains or alongside woods. Just a few kilometres away from the town was tough nature, where one was stripped of any identity and protection. Thus, the border between the town/*bios* and nature/*zoē* was more transparent than ever in those times. In a state of *zoē* people could not have the protection of their *bios*. Likewise, in the novel the life outside the towns might be likened to the state of *zoē* although it was under the jurisdiction of the Ottoman Empire, as one could not be distinguished from an outlaw or bandit who dwells in nature as was a common practice in the Empire for that period on the brink of war (Bernières, 2005, pp. 128-9). Eskibahçe is located between the side of a “scrubby hillside rolled to a gentle crest,” (Bernières, 2005, p. 31) and a cliff above the Aegean Sea. It is reached through a thick pine forest where the Muslims bury their deceased (Bernières, 2005, p. 263). Therefore, it can be said that the town of Eskibahçe belongs to *bios* surrounded by what is closer to *zoē*. The nearest towns are a few days' away walk. For this reason, the townsmen wait for each other to travel as a caravan to other towns for any kind of business, in order to have a part of the communal *bios* —together with the protection it provides—with them while entering into the nature for days.

In order to understand the bare life and its habitants, the creator of both, the sovereign, must also be examined in detail. Carl Schmitt opens his book *Political Theology* with a description of the sovereign: “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception” (Schmitt, 2005, p. 5). As mentioned above, the sovereign is the lawmaker, and thus the creator of *bios* (see Agamben, 1998). As the decision-maker over law and political life,

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1 It can be translated as ‘Every Day is a Holy Day for the Mad’.

the sovereign has the power to decide who deserves to be in his *bios*, and who does not. Agamben refers to this phenomenon as the *sovereign exception*. As the primal exception, the sovereign excludes himself from the law. Thus, Schmitt describes the sovereign as a “borderline concept,” since the sovereign as the creator of this juridical order belongs to law, yet with his power to exclude himself from the law as well as the obligations that come together with it, the sovereign resides outside of the same order (2005, p. 7). Like Schmitt, Agamben describes the position of the sovereign in the juridical order as a paradoxical one as the sovereign is both an insider and outsider (see Agamben, 1998). However, the sovereign’s own exception is a preferable exception, because the sovereign is excluded only from the restrictions and penalties of the law while he possesses the protection of the law.

However, there is also the other side of the coin; the sovereign exception of others. It is the exception of those who the sovereign thinks do not deserve to fully participate in his *bios*. He thus bans those people towards the bare life that lies outside of, or on the threshold of, *bios*. Agamben thus points out the fact that the sovereign not only distinguishes what is inside and what is outside, but also “traces a threshold (the state of exception) between the two, on the basis of which outside and inside, the normal situation and chaos” (1998, p. 19). For Agamben as for Derrida, the state of sovereign exception is inevitable during any state of emergency (see Agamben, 1998; Derrida, 2009). Any state of emergency suspends the law, and thus, the state of exception—in other words the sovereign exception—becomes the norm instead of the juridical rules (Agamben, 1998, p. 96). In the chaotic atmosphere of the state of emergency, the state/sovereign may fall short to recognise and protect its subjects (Derrida, 2009, pp. 41-3). Without any doubt, declaration of any war would be the cause of a state of emergency which provides the necessary atmosphere for *homines sacri* to be created as Derrida comments in his seminars when the state or the sovereign wages or joins to war, he treats the enemies like non-humans (Derrida, 2009, p. 73).

*Birds without Wings* providing the historical context of the events described in the novel, discusses the Muslim exception imposed by different sovereigns from the time of wars, and the results of these exceptions are given as a political background:

In March 1821, the Greek Christians tortured and massacred 15,000 Greek Muslim civilians [...] During the 1820s, 20,000 Muslims were expelled from Serbia [...] In 1876 Bulgarian Christians massacred an unknown

number of peasants of Turkish origin [...] In 1877, Cossacks assisted by Bulgarians seized all the property of Muslims [...] By 1879, one-third of all the Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina had either emigrated or been killed. (2005, pp. 286–287)

Muslims who lived together with Christians, Jews or Armenians in different countries were declared as non-citizens during these wars. This sovereign exception is not unique to Muslims, of course. In the novel, during the course of several wars between the Turks and Greeks, Greek troops raped, tortured and killed Muslims while Turkish troops raped, tortured and killed Christians just as the sovereign—according to the chronology provided in the novel Sultan Mehmet V (reigned 1909-1918) and also Mehmet VI (reigned 1918-1922)—banned Christians from the community as citizens. Ibrahim the Goatherd, later known as Ibrahim the Mad because of all the horrible scenes he witnessed in the war, remembers all those terrifying things that he encountered in Greek houses in the villages from little boys who were bayoneted to pregnant women with fires lighted on their chests (Bernières, 2005, p. 563). Likewise, the Muslim population, and the Greek Christian population of Eskibahçe, experience the sovereign exception during the First World War and its aftermath.

According to Agamben, the sovereign does not hesitate to reveal the person who is living the bare life; *homo sacer* or sacred human (Çifçi, 2018). *Homo sacer* is created through the exception of someone whom the sovereign wishes to exclude from his political life, *bios*. It is, who the sovereign pushes outside of his *bios*, to the bare life. Before dealing with the figure of *homo sacer* in detail, the concept of sacredness must be examined in order to fully understand Agamben's *homo sacer* as a banned human being. Agamben derives the concept of *homo sacer* from ancient Roman civilisation. In ancient Greece and Rome, where the sacrifice of living beings was a common practice, the idea of sacredness can only be attributed through some sacrificial practices of separating life from the body. Thus, a sacred human is the one who cannot be sacrificed to the gods in any ritual as s/he is not pure anymore. Çifçi summarises this sacredness of *homo sacer*—or as he puts it, a *curse*d man in essence and the conditions he is subjected to a conceptual sacredness in the modern sense, which is gained right at the moment the *homo sacer* is forced out of *bios* by the sovereign and thus loses his sacredness.

Agamben points out the treatise of Pompeius Festus *De Verborvm Significatv* (*On the Significance of Words*) in which Festus defines significant words in Latin, where *homo*

*sacer* is mentioned in the context of Roman tribunal law; “At homo sacer is est, quem populus iudicavit ob maleficium: nequefas est eum immolari, sed, qui occidit, parricidi non damnatur;” (Festus, 1997, p. 424) which can be translated as follows: He is a sacred man whom people judge for wrongdoing; he must not be sacrificed, but, he who slew him, is not condemned for parricide<sup>2</sup>. So, according to Roman law, the criminal was reduced to a mere living by the sovereign’s decision on the exception of that people. The banned becomes a *homo sacer* that can be killed by anyone without committing a homicide as this banned sacred man no longer has a political identity. Since “normal political rights and legal safeguards were stripped away,” from the *homo sacer*, he “was reduced to the mere naked or bare, life” by the sovereign. Jacques Derrida in his seminars on *The Beast & The Sovereign*, describes the exception of the sovereign as a creation of a “political bestiary,” (2009, p. 22). *Homines sacri* (*sacred men*) are no longer considered as human beings but beasts “to destroy, deny, put to death,” (Derrida, 2009, p. 131). They cannot be sacrificed, and yet they can be killed by anyone since they are seen as a mere naked body by the inhabitants of political life, rather than human beings. The sovereign expels even its own people in states of emergency. Derrida says “when it [the sovereign] goes off to war, treats its enemies as ‘hors la loi [outside the law]’ and ‘hors l’humanite [outside humanity]’ [...] in the name of the human, of human rights and humanitarianism, other men are then treated like beasts, [...] like non-men, or like outlaws, like werewolves” (2009, p. 73). This exception in the time of emergency comes from the sovereign himself, which we can conclude that until the moment of exception the citizens do not recognise each other as *homo sacer*, a non-citizen. Tatiana Golban proffers that the novel *Birds Without Wings*, “explores the fundamental issues of sacred and profane” (2015, p. 51).

Louis de Bernières’ *Eskibaḫçe* nestles people from different ethnicities and different religious beliefs in its harmonious environment (see Şahin, 2021; Golban, 2015; Golban and Yürükler, 2019). “What connects the local people of *Eskibaḫçe* to one another is not their ancestral definition of who they are, but their shared experiences and customs.” (Şahin, 2021, p. 156). The townspeople do not marginalise each other according to their ethnicity in the pre-war era in *Eskibaḫçe*. They respect their differences in belief and they do not hesitate to participate in each other’s cultural practices. In *Eskibaḫçe*, babies are delivered with a cross on the belly of the pregnant woman who drinks from the bowl on which verses from the Koran were engraved (Bernières, 2005, p. 7). The Muslims of the town ask their neighbours to pray over the icon of the Panagia

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2 The translation is mine.

Glykophilousa in the Church of St Nicholas, or to offer some libation to Mary the Virgin on behalf of them. Likewise, the Christians tie white cloths or ribbons to the tekke of the saint, or ask for some amulets with verses from the Koran written by the imam of the town (Bernières, 2005, p. 65). Thus, de Bernières' Eskibahçe is a "grey area" where different ethnicities live harmoniously "without labeling each other as black and white" as Golban and Yürükler (2019, p. 410) describe.

However, the inhabitants of this beautiful town fail to prevent not only their neighbours but friends and families from becoming the *homines sacri* of the sovereign. A group of non-Muslim minority who are deported from the town were the first exemplars of Eksibahçe's *homines sacri*. The people lived together with other ethnicities for hundreds of years on the soil of the Ottoman Empire, yet suffered due to the brutal campaigns and propaganda of hatred among the Ottoman citizens of different origins. The Armenians thus hoped to own their own land. This hope led the Armenians to their tragic end. Many of the non-Muslim soldiers in the Ottoman army sided with the enemy, namely the Russians, during the continuous wars (Bernières, 2005, pp. 303–304). Naturally, this act was considered as high treason for the Ottomans, thus the non-Muslim community were made into *homines sacri* gradually by "directives coming out of Istanbul" the capital of the Ottoman Empire where the sovereign Sultan resides, "that there should be no ill treatment" (Bernières, 2005, p. 304).

Though, the political protection of the sovereign is not applicable to the beast of the sovereign, the *homo sacer*, as has been mentioned earlier. Once declared as *homo sacer* by the sovereign, the people are "no longer recognized as members of human society" as Magnus Fiskesjö points out (2012, p. 168). Likewise, the march from Eskibahçe to the unknown is left at the mercy of irregular troops, who are known for their unjust and uncontrolled behaviours. The people on the march are said to be left without food or water, the elders who could not walk further away bludgeoned to death, and every one of them beaten at least once to surrender their valuables to the irregular troops (Bernières, 2005, pp. 309–310). When the marching group encounters Rustem Bey, a landowner and protector, the people plead with him to save them; to which Rustem Bey answers in frustration; "The order is from the governor. I can't do anything about it. Otherwise, by God's will, I would save you." (Bernières, 2005, p. 310), as he is aware of the fact that the sovereign decision cannot be altered by anyone but the sovereign. Yet, out of his humanity, Rustem Bey interferes with the situation when he catches some of the troops further away in a deeper part of the forest, separate from the party



preparing to rape the three young daughters of one of the expelled non-Muslims, Levon the Sly. Towards the end of the novel the imam Abdulhamid Hodja's wife, Ayse, describes how they find out that their old neighbours were killed not far away from Eskibahçe. One of the townsmen, Stamos the Birdman finds "the skeletons with holes and cuts in their heads," on his way, and he recognises the shawl of Levon's wife on one of the skeletons whose "feet had been nailed to donkey shoes" (Bernières, 2005, p. 558).

Later, the minor non-Muslim population, the major population of Eskibahçe, the Greeks, becomes *homines sacri* in the following years. The upcoming situation reveals itself first in small instances, such as Mehmetçik's becoming Greek in everyone's eyes. In November 1914, the authorities come to Eskibahçe to recruit every useful man in town for the war. Karatavuk wants to volunteer in his father's place and Mehmetçik doesn't want to be separated from his best friend for life. "We've come to volunteer. [...] For the empire and the Sultan Padishah." (Bernières, 2005, p. 292) Mehmetçik says. However, the sergeant accepts Karatavuk since he is Turkish, yet declines Mehmetçik as he is a Christian. So, angry with the reply he gets, Mehmetçik adds with a proud manner that he is an Ottoman. Yet it is not enough to change the outcome; the Ottomans who learned their lessons from past events with non-Muslim deserters do not let anyone but Muslims fight with the enemy in the trenches. The only way for Christians to join the war is to go and work in one of the labour battalions where they will make roads or bridges. Leaving the queue in front of the sergeant in defeat, Mehmetçik laments; "Suddenly it matters that I am a Christian, where it mattered only a little before." (Bernières, 2005, p. 296). A few years later the same sergeant who recruits soldiers from Eskibahçe comes to the town again, this time for the Christians.

The Greek population of Asia Minor lived together first with the Seljuk Turks following the Battle of Manzikert in 1071, and then the Ottoman Turks. Almost a millennium later, the Greek citizens of the Ottoman Empire were banned by the sovereign. "[T]he host became the guest and finally that same guest became the hostage in his own home town" says Sandra Josipović about the Christians of Eskibahçe (2016, p.74). In the aftermath of the First World War and the Turkish Independence War right after it, the sovereign excludes the Christian population, who became their enemy in these wars. The newly founded Republic of Turkey bans Christians from its soil, in the same way that Greece bans Muslims. So, Turkish Christians, as well as Greek Muslims, are made into *homines sacri*, as the two countries' sovereigns expel their citizens in a decided population exchange.

Sergeant Osman comes to Eskibahçe to inform all the Christians to pack their belongings and to be prepared for a march to Telmessos, from where they are going to be transferred to Greece (Bernières, 2005, p. 527). "This," the sergeant indicates "is thanks to orders from above" (Bernières, 2005, p. 532) pointing out the fact that it is an order of the sovereign that cannot be challenged. The Christians of Eskibahçe ask in terror, "Are the Greeks Ottomans like us?" to which the sergeant answers "No, from now on you are Greeks, not Ottomans." (Bernières, 2005, p. 527). The *homo sacer* is always made into 'the other' by the sovereign; "No longer man but the beast." (Derrida, 2009, p.124). Among the group, it is obvious that some people cannot proceed for days because they are too old, or too young to walk, such as Polyxeni's great-grandfather, Socrates, who is known to be more than ninety-four years old. There are children, as well as babies both in their mothers' arms and bellies waiting to be born. It is obvious "in advance that without transport the whole operation was going to be a fiasco" with lots of deaths on the road (Bernières, 2005, p. 532).

Giorgio Agamben describes the *homo sacer* in his book as someone that "cannot be included in the whole of which it is a member and cannot be a member of the whole in which it is always already included." (1998, p. 21). In the case of the Greek *homines sacri*—here we need to highlight the word Greek as both the Christians of Turkey, and the Muslims come from Greece are referred to as Greek—the Christian population in Turkey is now considered as Greek and thus banned, albeit they do not identify themselves and are not identified by their neighbours as Greek. Although they were ethnically Greek, they spoke mainly Turkish, and for that reason they were not welcomed in Greece as Greeks, but despised at this time as Turks. "When the Christians were expelled from Eskibahçe, their former neighbours started referring to them as Greeks." (Josipović, 2016, p.75). The only Christian from Eskibahçe that the reader hears from after the population exchange is Drosoula. She depicts the situation of the so-called *Greek* population of Turkey in Greece. She tells the reader how her husband's family, the Drapanitikos', rejected them when they arrived at Cephalonia in such hardship just because they were seen as Turks there in Greece (Bernières, 2005, pp. 19-20). The Christian population coming from Turkey was treated unkindly, pushed and pulled, spat at, and labelled as "filthy Turks." (Bernières, 2005, p. 571). Years later, she summarises the whole enterprise with these words; "I lost my family, my town, my language and my earth." (Bernières, 2005, p. 24).

On the one hand, the Christian population of Turkey were made into *homo sacer* and banned from Turkey while not accepted by the Greeks either. On the other hand,

the Muslim population of Greece were made into *homo sacer* in the same way and were banned from Greece, while likewise not being accepted by the Turks. After the departure of the Christians from Eskibahçe, Greek Muslims from Crete arrived in the town as a result of the population exchange between the two countries. They were banned from Greece as they are Muslims, yet the Cretan Muslims, who are settled in houses emptied by Christians, are not warmly welcomed by the people of Eskibahçe. About them, Karatavuk says that they spoke Greek, not Turkish, and life became very hard for them in Eskibahçe as people called them “filthy Greeks,” and spat at them (Bernières, 2005, p. 583) just echoing the treatment of the former habitants of Eskibahçe in Greece.

Also, in Louis de Bernières novel, some people are depicted as perhaps even more *sacer* than *homo sacer*. While every Christian is forced to depart from Eskibahçe, there are a few people who are not even accepted as *homines sacri*; as Bernières explains:

Among their number was not to be found the Dog. He remained amid in the tombs, removed from all considerations of race and religion by virtue of his speechlessness, his mutilation and his anchoritic life. Neither did any of the Christian prostitutes arrive from the brothel, being similarly removed from all considerations of race and religion by virtue of their profession. (2005, p. 528)

Neither the mad nor the prostitutes are accepted as proper human beings in Eskibahçe even when it was a well-functioning community (see Bernières, 2005). They have already been pushed towards the peripheries of any political system. Already neglected by the society and the sovereign, as a mad person, the Dog of Eskibahçe<sup>3</sup>, who has not even got a proper name, and the prostitutes kept in the brothel of Eskibahçe located in the outer parts of the town are not included among the Greek *homines sacri* gathered by the authorities.

The sovereign not only has the power of exception, but also the power over life and death, as Agamben mentions in the “*Vitae Necisque Potestas*” chapter of *Homo Sacer* (1998, pp. 55-56). He highlights the formula *vitae necisque potestas* in Roman law which means ‘power over life and death’ that can be attributed to the sovereign power. Through the sovereign exception, the sovereign as the head of the political community has the

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3 the Dog as a *homo sacer* will be specifically introduced in detail in the following subsection.

right to expel someone from *bios* to bare life as a *homo sacer* that can be killed by anyone; thus, it can be said that the sovereign has power over that person's life and death. Most of the time the sovereign is thought to be a king, president or governor, yet as Agamben explains, according to Roman law "the *vitae necisque potestas* attaches itself to every free male citizen from birth and thus seems to define the very model of political power in general, *Not simple natural life, but life exposed to death (bare life or sacred life) is the originary political element.*" (1998, p. 55). Thus, he proposes that the father and the husband, as the head of the family, acquire the same power of the sovereign over life and death "within the sphere of the *domus*," (Agamben, 1998, p. 55) — the sphere of the home or family. Unlike the political sovereign, the father and the husband have the power to kill within the familial sphere in the case of a caught adulterer of their daughters or wives, specifies Agamben (1998, p. 55). If the father and husband are the sovereigns of the *domus*, they have the power to expel the members of their families out of the family sphere. In other words, both figures have the power to create a *homo sacer* that dwells in the bare life through the sovereign right of exception. If *Birds without Wings* is read in the light of this knowledge, it is seen that an example for each of the figures, both of the father and the husband as the sovereign, is offered to the reader in the novel.

Louis de Bernières introduces one of the townsmen, Yusuf the Tall, for the first time in the twenty-seventh chapter of the book, the only chapter about Yusuf. He is a father of daughters and sons who is very fond of his children. Originally coming from a conservative Ottoman town, Konya, he is a highly religious inhabitant of Eskibahçe. He thinks of the Muslims of the town as nothing but mongrels and wishes to have a life unmixed with the infidel population of the town (Bernières, 2005, pp. 150-156). Yet he was living a tranquil life among the people of Eskibahçe until the moment that the condition of one of his daughters, Bezmialem, is revealed. She gets pregnant out of wedlock by a Christian. The fornication of Bezmialem provides the suitable environment that Agamben describes according to the Roman law for Yusuf the Tall. As the father-sovereign, he "commands" (Bernières, 2005, p. 152) the death of Bezmialem, together with the innocent baby in her belly, and he appoints his second son Sadettin to carry out the murder. Full of grief, Sadettin kills his sister out of obligation to his father, but after the deed, he leaves home for the Taurus Mountains. The father-sovereign creates a *homo sacer* that is banned from the family through the act of crime. Aware of his new status as a *homo sacer*, Sadettin says "I am an outlaw. That is where I will be. With God's help, I shall not live long" (Bernières, 2005, p. 155).

On a similar occasion Rustem Bey, the aga of Eskibahçe, acts as a sovereign as he is a husband. He is married to Tamara, who is in love with another man, the handsome yet wayward Selim. Most of the time, upon his arrival home, Rustem Bey finds women's slippers in front of the haremlık door that opens to the women's quarters which cannot be entered by any man without permission. The meaning of the slippers is that another woman is in the haremlık so that Rustem Bey should not enter the quarter until the slippers are gone. He begins to suspect and interrogate this recurring situation. Finally, one day his suspicions are proven to be correct; Rustem Bey catches Tamara's lover disguised in women's clothes coming to visit her regularly away from Rustem Bey's eyes (Bernières, 2005, pp. 93-101). Rustem Bey, as the husband who catches the adulterous wife, just like in the Roman law Agamben mentions, uses his right to kill, and to decide on someone's life and death. Rustem Bey kills Selim with his dagger and grabs Tamara by the hair to drag her to the meydan, the main square of the town. "This woman is my wife. She is a whore and an adulteress" (Bernières, 2005, p. 102) announces the aga, and by his verdict, Tamara is banned out of the familial sphere to become a *homo sacer* that can be killed by anyone, to which she coldly responds; "Kill me, like the wolves and dogs" (Bernières, 2005, p. 102). Since she is a *homo sacer* now, the people of Eskibahçe in the meydan start to hurl stones at her. While Tamara is being stoned to death, Rustem Bey cannot even watch the brutal scene, but turns his back to what he has done in pangs of remorse. Luckily, Tamara is rescued from death by Abdulhamid Hodja, who happens to be passing by (Bernières, 2005, pp. 102-103). However, as a *homo sacer*, Tamara cannot return to her home, thus she seeks sanctuary in a brothel of Eskibahçe. Together with other prostitutes in the brothel, such as the Christian ones that are not included in the departure of the Christian population from the town, she lives a bare life. Her new life is full of misery, starvation and diseases (Bernières, 2005, pp. 420-421). After having four miscarriages as well as stillbirths, she is happy to die soon due to her illness. Years later, when Rustem Bey visits Tamara in the brothel for the first and last time, she describes her bare life as "death's selamlık," explaining that she has no pleasure at all (Bernières, 2005, p. 421).

## Wolves of the Sovereign

Francois Zammit highlights that "the law [of the sovereign] has the ability to turn humans into animals, and therefore in this manner changing the very nature of the targeted individuals" (2017, p. 3), the ones who are made into *homines sacri* by the sovereign exception. Derrida, in his seminars, calls these targeted individuals that are

being excluded by the sovereign mostly during the state of emergency the 'beasts of the sovereign' (2009, p. 46). For him, the beast of the sovereign "is always a wolf [...] that has to be hunted down, chased away, repressed, combated" (2009, p. 88). Furthermore, Agamben, echoing with Derrida, points to Rodolphe Jhering, as the first person who equates *homo sacer* to the ancient Germanic *wargus* (wolf or werewolf) in *Homo Sacer* (1998, p. 63). Just like *homo sacer*, the *wargus* is a figure who is expelled from society and can be killed without committing a homicide. Both the *homo sacer* and the *wargus* live a bare life in a state of indistinction, being neither beast nor man. Due to their transitory nature, "divided between the forest and the city – the werewolf [...] like that of the sacred man, [...] dwells paradoxically within both [exclusion and inclusion] while belonging to neither" (Agamben, 1998, p. 63). Consequently, it can be deduced that *homo sacer* has parallels with *wargus*, and/or a connection with wolves to a certain extent.

Although both Derrida and Agamben describe the wolf of the sovereign, there is a subtle difference between the beast of Derrida and the wolf of Agamben. For Derrida, the wolf—or the beast in general—has a connection with the sovereign. The sovereign's excepted self is reflected in the beast. The sovereign, by means of the sovereign exception, becomes the beast as he is "above the laws like the werewolf," (Derrida, 2009, p. 106). Instead, for Agamben, the wolf is the other that the sovereign expels from his community. It is only connected with the *homo sacer* and not the sovereign.

The wolves of the sovereign are also found in *Birds without Wings*. In fact, the Dog, chronologically the first *homo sacer* of Eskibahçe, introduces the reader to the idea of wolves because "if you trace their [the dogs'] lineages far enough back in time all dogs are descended from wolves." (Handwerk, 2018). One day, the Dog arrives at Eskibahçe from an unknown place. He wears only a rag, and his feet are covered in blood from walking for days. The townspeople watch him as he goes through the town towards the hillside. Despite his unusual state, they are not afraid of him; "It was as if they were in no danger because the man did not live *in the same world*, and would never see them." (the italics are mine, Bernières, 2005, p. 33). As the *homo sacer*, who "dwells in the no-man's-land between the home and the city" (Agamben, 1998, p. 56), the Dog takes up residence among the ruins of the Lycean stone tombs carved into the hillside, "in this wasteland between the town and the ocean [...] becoming a specter even before he had properly died" (Bernières, 2005, p. 31). He is made in to a *homo sacer* not only for his hermitic existence among the tombs "all but naked" (Bernières, 2005, p.

585), or for his untamed demeanour, but towards the end of the novel he is said to “have his lips pinned back, and been made to bite down on the red-hot iron rod that had been forced into his mouth.” (Bernières, 2005, p. 585) as a punishment.

Later, the *homo sacer* of the husband-sovereign Rustem Bey<sup>4</sup>, Tamara refers to the wolves of Eskibahçe. When she is declared a *homo sacer*, she calmly tells the crowd of townspeople to kill her “like the wolves and dogs” (Bernières, 2005, p. 102) as has already been mentioned. Finally, both Sadettin, the *homo sacer* of the father-sovereign Yusuf the Tall, and Mehmetçik, the *homo sacer* of the state sovereign, become wolves since “the ‘true’ werewolf, is indeed the one who, like the beast [...] finds himself placed ‘outside the law,’ outlaw” as Derrida describes (2009, p. 64). At the end of the novel, Karatavuk encounters his childhood best friend after seven years. After Karatavuk, Mehmetçik is also recruited as a soldier for the labour battalions. The Christians in the battalions are not allowed to fight against the enemy but are forced to dig trenches or build roads. Their condition is even worse than that of the soldiers since the Christians are made into *homines sacri* by the sovereign state. So, Mehmetçik deserts the inhuman conditions of the battalions as he wants to die with dignity in the war. Yet, the beast of the sovereign has “no history and no future” (Derrida, 2009, p. 57), therefore Mehmetçik cannot go back to the town or have a proper life in *bios* as he is chased by authorities as a deserter. The only life he can be a part of is the bare life of the outlaws, so he joins the bandits and gains the nickname Red Wolf. “You’ve gone from being a little robin to being the great big famous Red Wolf” (Bernières, 2005, p. 579) says Karatavuk to his friend. Another wolf whose identity the reader learns of through Mehmetçik is Sadettin, the son of Yusuf the Tall. When he leaves his home behind, Sadettin joins the outlaws in the Taurus Mountain. The dangerous situations he puts himself into while trying to get himself killed, make him the leader of the outlaws and he becomes known as the Black Wolf.

## Conclusion

This study attempts to read Louis de Bernières’ novel *Birds without Wings* through Agamben’s concept of *homo sacer*, in which both the Greek and Turkish population of Eskibahçe are turned into *homines sacri* by the act of the sovereign exception of either the political or the patriarchal sovereign. Like in the idiom ‘desperate times call for desperate measures’ the state of emergency calls for the exclusion of certain people.

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4 With a Derridean reading, Rüstem Bey and Yusuf the Tall can also be read as wolves, since they are sovereigns.



Giorgio Agamben is known for his conceptualisation of the figure who is excluded by the sovereign, *homo sacer*, together with the type of life in which the *homo sacer* dwells, bare life. It was inevitable that *homines sacri* would be produced in Eskibahçe as the state of emergency—in the case of *Birds without Wings*, constant wars—allows the sovereign “to remove groups of individuals from the protection of the law” (Zammit, 2017, p. 5). The borders between *bios* and bare life becomes transparent in the course of time in the Eskibahçe of Louis de Bernières. The Muslim population, as well as the Christian population, become *homines sacri* that are pushed out of *bios*, to a bare life where they can be treated as sub-human. Yusuf the Tall as the father-sovereign, and Rustem Bey as the husband-sovereign banned Sadettin and Tamara, respectively, from the political sphere of their families. Agamben and Derrida emphasise the bestial connections of *homo sacer* as a “structure both human and inhuman” (Derrida, 2009, p. 151), that can also be examined, as in the novel, through multiple references to wolves. Since the *homo sacer* can be killed without committing homicide, unfortunately, the majority of the *homines sacri* of Eskibahçe in *Birds without Wings* were beaten, raped, tortured and killed. As put by Bernières in the epilogue, all the *homines sacri* of Eskibahçe as birds without wings;

are always confined to earth, no matter how much [they] climb to the high places and flap [their] arms. Because [they] cannot fly, [they] are condemned to do things that do not agree with [them]. Because [they] have no wings [they] are pushed into struggles and abominations that [they] did not seek. (2005, p. 621)

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