Human Rights, the Family and the Bildungsroman in Goretti Kyomuhendo’s *Waiting: A Novel of Uganda at War*

Emily Hogg, Department for the Study of Culture, University of Southern Denmark

ejh@sdu.dk

Abstract: This article argues that Goretti Kyomuhendo’s *Waiting: A Novel of Uganda at War* exposes some of the conceptual problems of contemporary human rights discourse. Joseph Slaughter proposes that the Bildungsroman and human rights norms are interdependent, mutually reinforcing, and share underlying assumptions about the relationship between individuals and society. However, if human rights discourse and the Bildungsroman are analogous, this article suggests that Kyomuhendo’s experiments with the form of the Bildungsroman offer a critique of human rights discourse which is more radical than the ambivalent examples Slaughter considers. The article examines the insistent use of familial imagery, and in particular images of blood and birth, in *Waiting*, and argues that the repeated use of such language is in tension with the conventional logic of the Bildungsroman, in which the plot tends to depend on the movement away from the familial sphere. This tension recalls, in literary terms, a contradiction in conceptualizations of the democratic nation-state which Jacques Derrida explored through analysis of the term ‘fraternity’, and thus indicates the limitations of a version of human rights discourse which centres the nation-state.

Keywords: Human Rights; Bildungsroman; Goretti Kyomuhendo; Ugandan literature; fraternity

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The definition and conceptualisation of human rights discourse remains, in important ways, subject to debate. Recent work by Samuel Moyn attempts to provide human rights with a demystified history, for example, while Peter de Bolla has explored the limitations of human rights’ current conceptual grounding, and offered an alternative.\(^1\) The contemporary discourse has achieved remarkable prominence as a global language of politics and of morality whilst criss-crossing disciplinary boundaries and vocabularies (it is at once legal, political and philosophical) and remaining difficult to define satisfactorily or grasp conceptually. As Amartya Sen puts it, human rights are characterised by the ‘remarkable co-existence of stirring appeal and deep conceptual scepticism’\(^2\).

This article examines the understanding of contemporary human rights law Joseph R. Slaughter advances in *Human Rights Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*. Slaughter’s discussion of the international law of human rights is closely attentive to its paradoxes, begged questions, limitations and silences— in fact, he makes them central to his account. He argues that human rights law is focused on the free and full development of the human personality, and that it has a peculiar, complex image of what human personality development entails, understanding it to be both inherent in human beings and produced by social interaction. There are three particularly important consequences of the notion of human personality development as Slaughter describes it. First, human personality development addresses the elision of the difference between human and citizen which, as Hannah Arendt argued in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, undermined eighteenth-century declarations of rights. Second, human personality development allows the cosmopolitan rhetoric of human rights discourse to be partially reconciled with the state-centricity of its legal institutions. Third, human rights law shares with the literary genre of the Bildungsroman its curiously near-tautological account of human personality development,
enabling the Bildungsroman to disseminate and normalise it, compensating, to some extent, for the weakness of the institutions of international human rights law.

The Bildungsroman is an elusive literary genre. Tobias Boes points out that it is ‘surprisingly hard to discover novels that fulfil the strictures of totality, teleology, and normativity demanded by the idealist understanding of Bildung, even if one consults works that were written in immediate temporal vicinity to Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship.’ The theory of the genre rarely coincides with actual examples of it, and in addition, Boes argues, ‘the most interesting thing about the Bildungsroman […] is that the fact of its “nonfulfillment” isn’t merely accidental to, but rather constitutive of, the critical tradition that it has spawned.’ In Human Rights Inc., novels which experiment with the formal conventions of the Bildungsroman tend to be understood as critiques of particular aspects of the international human rights regime which nonetheless demonstrate an underlying commitment to its universal humanist goals. Slaughter finds particularly important examples of this ambivalence in novels written in the Global South.

In this article, I suggest that reading Bildungsromane can enable a more radical critique of human rights’ conceptual underpinnings than Human Rights Inc. allows. My argument is that there are aspects of human rights discourse which are conceptually incoherent and which place serious limitations on its ability to address the violations it seeks to combat. The particular conceptual impasse I identify can become visible through the Bildungsroman because this impasse concerns the very constellation of issues that links human rights law with the literary genre in Slaughter’s account: the split between human and citizen, and the relationship between the individual and the nation-state. In its reliance on nation-statist forms, I suggest, human rights law remains vulnerable to a problem which haunts theorisations of the democratic nation-state, and which can be tracked through the use of the metaphor of fraternity in political and legal language. I propose that it also becomes
visible through the insistence on familial imagery in the experimental Bildungsroman I analyse here, Goretti Kyomuhendo’s 2007 novel Waiting: A Novel of Uganda at War. This conceptual impasse concerns the boundaries of the democratic community of the nation-state, its attempts to use both similarity and difference as criteria for belonging, and its simultaneous impulses towards inclusion, and towards exclusions based on the categories of race and gender.

I read Waiting here as a counter-narrative to and comment on the narratives of normative international human rights discourse, and the novel is well-suited to being read in these terms. Uganda has been deeply implicated in the development of international human rights norms. Its inhabitants have repeatedly been the victims of violations of human rights, including massacres of particular ethnic groups, extrajudicial killings, the imprisonment of political opponents of multiple governments, torture, the expulsion of all Asian residents of the country in 1972, extensive failures to protect freedoms of speech and expression, and the abduction of child soldiers. The country has also repeatedly been the focus of international human rights campaigns, but the extremes of violence and the high points of international attention to human rights abuses in the country have not always precisely coincided – these are two parallel though not identical narratives.

Samuel Moyn argues that 1977 was the ‘breakthrough year’ for human rights and he identifies the 1970s more generally as the decade in which the concept first became used as part of an international ethical language. The rule of Uganda’s most internationally notorious president, Idi Amin, very neatly coincided with this period: he came to power after a coup in 1971; he was in turn deposed in 1979 by Ugandan exiles and the Tanzanian army, provoked by Amin’s annexing of Tanzanian land. In 1978 the US began a trade embargo with Uganda, specifically because of human rights concerns; Ralph D. Nurnberger writes that ‘the October 10, 1978, embargo of United States’ trade with Uganda established new precedents in
America’s commitment to human rights’ because it made an explicit link between substantive economic action and violations of human rights, articulated as such.\textsuperscript{7} Uganda was also the subject of sustained attention from international non-governmental organisations in the 1970s; between 1974 and 1976 the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) alone made five separate submissions about human rights violations in Uganda to the United Nations.\textsuperscript{8} Hans Peter Schmitz argues that international human rights organisations, including Amnesty International and the ICJ, ‘transformed the international image of human rights violating regimes in Kenya and Uganda’; in the case of Uganda, he argues, this transformation began in 1973-4.\textsuperscript{9}

Uganda became closely associated with the issue of child soldiers in the late 1990s and 2000s because the insurgent group the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), which has been fighting the government led by Yoweni Museveni since 1986, regularly abducted children. After 2006, the LRA was forced out of Uganda to the Central African Republic and Democratic Republic of the Congo. Despite this, in 2012 Uganda became the focus of an extremely controversial and high-profile campaign in aid of child soldiers, organised by the American NGO Invisible Children and centred on the film \textit{Kony 2012}.\textsuperscript{10} As a Ugandan novel focusing on the end of Amin’s rule and depicting childhood and the perspective of a child during wartime, one way in which \textit{Waiting} can be read is as a rewriting of the tropes and themes of international human rights discourse, the development of which representations of Uganda have played a significant part in since the 1970s.

\textbf{The human personality}

For Slaughter, human personality development is the central concern of contemporary human rights law. The human person is understood here not as the individual human being, but rather as an artificial, rights-bearing entity (‘the human’s legal representation’).\textsuperscript{11}
Personality development is the process of removing the gap between the two, ‘so that the legal image of the person might come to be seen as coextensive with the actual human being’. Slaughter argues that human rights law pictures human personality as an inherent, inalienable quality of the human being, and also as something produced through social integration, and understanding human personality in this way deals with a problem associated with earlier discourses of universal rights. Hannah Arendt argued that eighteenth-century discussions of the rights of man ambiguously conflated the rights held by all ‘men’ with the rights of the members of the particular territorially and imaginatively bounded community of the nation-state - that is, with the rights of citizens. This ambiguity, she suggests, had disastrous consequences, which only became visible during the crises of statelessness of the twentieth century. When their citizenship rights were revoked, the stateless were forced to rely on their rights as ‘men’, as humans. If inalienable, universal rights possessed purely on the basis of human identity had value, the stateless should have been able to fall back on their protection. When the stateless became non-citizens, however, they became vulnerable precisely because of their identity as humans and only humans – this identity was the source of their defencelessness, it did not guarantee their rights.

Arendt argues that this simply human identity is antithetical to the political sphere – to what she calls the human artifice. For her, the political world is entirely different from the life symbolised by the simply human individual: ‘[e]quality, in contrast to all that is involved in mere existence, is not given us, but is the result of human organisation insofar as it is guided by the principle of justice’. The person who is merely human and who does not have an equal place in the political sphere to act and to speak from therefore carries a danger:

[t]he ‘alien’ is a frightening symbol of the fact of difference as such, and indicates those realms in which man cannot change and cannot act and in which, therefore, he has a distinct tendency to destroy.
In the political sphere, humans act and create and rule, but humanness in itself - the simple fact of being human and the irreducible individuality of each human life – can never be controlled in this way. Paradoxically, it is difficult for the stateless person to be treated as human precisely because she seems to embody the qualities of the private and simply human in the political sphere, and thus appears alienated from its organised equality.

Slaughter argues that human rights law aims to ‘repair the rupture between man and citizen that […] Arendt critiqued’.\textsuperscript{15} It can be understood as the project of bringing humanity into line with personality, or ensuring that all humans possess the artificial personality to which rights attach. At first sight, this might seem like a restatement of Arendt’s argument: identity as a human is not enough; humans must also possess ‘a place in the world’, here understood through the concept of personality.\textsuperscript{16} Arendt is, however, criticising an assumption made by earlier discussions of rights. She argues that the rights of man merely assumed that the identity of the human creature and political identity were coextensive, believing that ‘man’ and ‘the citizen’ were the same and that political identity was not something that could be removed from any member of a society. Slaughter’s discussion sees human rights developing at the point at which this earlier assumption was shown (by the stateless and by the death camps) to be extraordinarily dangerous. Contemporary rights law addresses the problem of a split in the category of the human, Slaughter argues. While human rights law aspires to a future time in which the human and the person will be inseparable, and indeed this inseparability is its animating, motivating principle, it nonetheless seeks to put in place the mechanism by which humanness can be transformed into political, social being. It does this because history has so conclusively proved that the human can be made rightless. The mechanism in question is personality development.

In particular, and perhaps surprisingly, given the tendency in human rights discourse towards cosmopolitan rhetoric, Slaughter shows that citizenship in a democratic nation-state
is envisaged in human rights law as the primary guarantee of human personality and, thus, human rights protection. This is a consequence of the particular nature of international human rights obligations. International law developed in order to regulate the relationships between states and so states, rather than individuals, were its subjects (those entities to which it is addressed). International human rights law, a branch of international law, is different because it makes individuals the subjects of international law for the first time. As Rosalyn Higgins writes, it ‘stipulates that obligations are owed directly to individuals (and not to the national government of an individual)’. Consequently, international human rights law has been understood as the first step in the development of a global system with the ability to hold the nation-state in check in order to protect individuals. Cosmopolitan rhetoric has, though, tended to exceed the capacity of actual legal institutions. Binding international human rights treaties must be signed and ratified by nation-states before citizens can be said to legally possess the rights contained in them. In this way, rights protection is dependent on the decisions made by national governments; if your government does not sign the treaty, then you will not be protected by it. Moreover, national governments are responsible for the implementation of international human rights law within their own jurisdictions.

Slaughter argues that it is through the notion of free and full development of the human personality that human rights law reconciles the concern with the individual which characterises its universalist, cosmopolitan ambition with the continued centrality of the nation-state to the global political order. On the one hand, human rights law proposes that free and full development of the human personality is only realisable as a citizen in a nation-state; in this way, the dominance of the global system by the nation-state is re-entrenched. On the other hand, international law establishes the features of human personality – its dignity and formal equality, for example – and binds states to respect and protect these equal and dignified persons. In this way, the power of the state is attenuated and the state and the
individual are brought into a new kind of relationship. This produces a complicated and
difficult version of citizenship. For human rights law, ‘the citizen is the highest form of
expression of human personality,’ but citizenship in a nation-state is not only an end in itself;
citizenship is seen as a mechanism of personality development, a means of producing
universal human persons. The personality thought to be developed through citizenship is
not expansive and may seem self-evident and obvious, though as Arendt shows, it is not. It is
simply ‘the legal capacity to act like every other person before the law,’ a capacity which
should be inalienable, but which demonstrably fails to be so in practice.

The fact that the new cosmopolitan rights language does not have substantial legal
institutions of its own has another consequence, Slaughter argues: cultural forms have been
conscripted to support, promulgate and disseminate its norms. Further, because the weakness
of international institutions has led human rights law to modify the conditions of citizenship
in the nation-state rather than developing new forms, Slaughter suggests that ‘it has little in
the way of cultural forms that are not proper to the nation-state to provide symbolic
legitimation for its projected social formations.’ International human rights discourse adopts
cultural forms traditionally associated with the liberal democratic nation-state, specifically the
Bildungsroman, to assist with the dissemination of human rights norms.

The Bildungsroman

The Bildungsroman and human rights law can function as partners because of the
assumptions they share; Slaughter writes that ‘Becoming what one already is by right is a
serviceable abstract for the plot of the idealist, affirmative Bildungsroman’. The idealist
Bildungsroman depicts the coming of age of an individual, typically accomplished through
taking on social roles and acquiescing to society’s values, and also presented as a matter of
individual, inner-directed self-assertion. Jerome Buckley suggests that in the conventional
English Bildungsroman ‘it is part of the youth’s ordeal to suffer “alienation”, to experience the loss of home and father and the correlatives of innocence and faith, and to seek self-realisation in a new often unaccommodating environment’. The climax is the moment at which the individual’s own identity is affirmed, not in isolation, but in and through this originally ‘unaccommodating environment’. For Slaughter, just as the notion of personality aims to grant to the human individual those rights which she should, by virtue of being human, already possess, so too in the Bildungsroman ‘the human personality is socially contingent – it is both the effect and impetus of the interactivity between the subjective individual and the objective form of the social world.’

The Bildungsroman’s roots are in Europe, and it has historically been closely connected with the European nation-state. While it has flourished outside of Europe, its spread has often been coercive. Slaughter writes that it has been ‘part of the freight of globalisation as the West has prosecuted it through colonialism, (neo)imperialisms, international humanitarianism, and multinational consumer capitalism.’ However, he also argues that the genre has been transformed in important ways as it has been put to use in different global contexts. Though the proliferation of ‘contemporary postcolonial Bildungsromane’ is ‘not merely a symptom of some natural telos of literary, humanist globalisation,’ these texts can nonetheless create new imaginative horizons and make visible ‘some of the not-yet-hegemonic norms of universal human rights.’

In Slaughter’s analysis postcolonial novels often challenge the nation-statist structure of human rights law, especially through their representations of reading. The literary education of characters often involves texts from around the world, situating ‘readers (both the novels’ protagonists and its real readers) in an international imaginary, a translinguistic, intertextual order of Bildungsromane.’ Though the regime of international human rights law is still organised by the nation-state, postcolonial Bildungsromane can envisage a global
order structured differently, before it exists in legal and political terms. This is an example of a more general role which postcolonial Bildungsromane have in Slaughter’s account: opening human rights norms to critique through formal innovation.

Slaughter analyses several novels which do not fulfil conventional expectations of the genre. He argues that, if the Bildungsroman and human rights law are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, then novels which feature deviations from the conventions of the Bildungsroman (where those conventions are still being referenced) constitute a ‘dissident subgenre’ which occupies an ambivalent position in relation to human rights discourse: ‘it holds onto the ideal of harmonious integration even as it narrates the unfulfilment of the promises of human rights and the idealist Bildung.’ Slaughter suggests that Bildungsromane from the Global South often take this sceptical, ambivalent approach, and here his work aligns with that of a number of other critics who have identified the non-European Bildungsroman as a valuable site of critique of the genre’s philosophical orientation.

Heather Smyth argues that the Bildungsroman ‘seems to carry with it ideological assumptions that underlie modes of justification for colonialist practice’ through its emphasis on ‘western European notions of development and the values of reason, wholeness, and progress.’ However, she concludes that ‘the postcolonial bildungsroman’ is a ‘living and generative genre precisely because it can so effectively reveal its own fault lines, which are the fault lines of colonial ideology itself.’ Similarly, for Ralph A. Austen, there is a body of African literature that can be usefully identified as the bildungsroman even (and sometimes especially) when it deviates from its “classical” European model, which is itself called into question by such comparisons.

Austen argues that there is a distinctive African bildungsroman, which often adapts and
questions European models, and the modes of thinking which support them.

**Waiting: an ambivalent Bildungsroman**

*Waiting* can be described as this kind of African Bildungsroman; it is clear from the outset of the novel that it is a very unusual example of the genre. It is set during a period of war, and the extreme conditions in which its main character and narrator, a teenage girl called Alinda, is forced to live put the conventions of the genre (and the model of human development they imply) under serious pressure. A note which precedes the novel clearly establishes its setting: ‘[t]he year is 1979. Ugandan exiles and the Tanzanian army, known simply as “the Liberators,” combine to oust Uganda’s dictator-ruler, Idi Amin, whose murderous regime has exterminated half a million people through state-sponsored violence.’

This precision about the context into which the novel’s events are imagined is continued in the narrative proper. The novel has twenty brief chapters, and in Chapter Two Alinda says:

[w]e had learned about the details of the war a month before when Father returned from the city where he had worked at the Main Post Office […] [The Liberators] were advancing quickly, heading for Kampala from the southwestern border that Uganda shared with Tanzania. The districts along that route were already in the hands of the Liberators. […] Our district was situated on one of the highways that led, via Lake Albert, to the West Nile and northern regions, and so, Amin’s soldiers were using it as their exit route (p.11).

The novel is thus located precisely in geographical terms and at an important political moment in Uganda’s history: the Tanzanian invasion forced Amin into exile and began a period of extreme uncertainty. Setting the novel in 1979 locates it an important transitional moment, albeit a transition between two periods of political oppression: between April 1979
and December 1980 there were three presidents for short periods and then a presidential commission. In 1980 Milton Obote, who had been Uganda’s first post-independence prime minister, took power again in controversial elections and his five-year rule was characterised, like Amin’s, by extreme repression.

*Waiting* is therefore specific about its location – temporally, geographically – and about the significance of these factors in the period’s political history. It might therefore be expected that one of the things the characters are, in the novel’s title’s word, waiting for, is the arrival of the Liberators. When the Liberators do arrive at Alinda’s village, this is not described in narrative time. Two weeks pass between chapters thirteen and fourteen, during which time Alinda is very ill and in bed. Then she says: ‘[t]wo weeks later, I was still bedridden. The Liberators had arrived’ (p.73). A few days later, when she is getting better she asks her sister, Maya, and her best friend, Jungu, where they have been and they say: to ‘visit our friends’ (p.77). The friends turn out to be the Liberators. Jungu tells Alinda that:

[w]hen they first arrived, they stayed here, in your compound, for a few days, but your father complained to their commander that they were harassing Maya and me […] it’s a long story. I tried to explain to your father that this soldier was just my friend, and that his other friend was interested in making Maya his friend. Anyway, your father became very angry and chased them away (p.79).

As the Tanzanian invasion represented a moment of transition on the national political stage, and as the novel’s note so explicitly ties the text to that political situation, the arrival of the Liberators would seem to be one of the events around which *Waiting* is hinged. Instead, Alinda’s brief statement ‘the Liberators had arrived’ (p.73) and Jungu’s précis of the ‘long story’ (p.79) are all the information in the novel about the events surrounding the arrival of the Liberators; after this the arrival of the soldiers into the village is never discussed explicitly
again, even though they set up camp nearby for some time. Alinda doesn’t reflect on what she hears, except to say ‘I could not believe I had missed all that’ (p.78). In this way, the political event which seems as if it will be central in fact forms a conspicuous gap.

At the end of the novel, normality is beginning to return: Father is preparing to return to the city and he tells the children that they will go back to school. These interactions, which might suggest the social sphere, social incorporation and the developmental plot of the Bildungsroman, remain outside the narrated events, only existing as promises for the future. M.J. Daymond argues:

one of the most striking features of *Waiting* is that it has no plot in the Aristotelian sense […]. The agent here is war, and what is required of Kyomuhendo’s characters […] is that they survive as best they can […] the novel’s title and its narrative point of view […] remind us that it is Alinda’s emergence into the adult world that has been halted by the arrival of soldiers in her village. Kyomuhendo’s lyrical art is such that we, rather than Alinda, feel this loss or denial at every turn. *Waiting* is thus a bildungsroman that has yet to happen.34

*Waiting* is, as Daymond argues, a ‘bildungsroman that has yet to happen’ in the sense that it makes reference to a number of the conventions of the genre – it links the characters’ lives to events on the national stage, and its ending holds out the future possibility of education. Where in the idealist Bildungsroman, the narrated incidents occur along a progressive path to future self-realisation for the central character and the text ends with integration, *Waiting* is characterised by the sudden truncation of seemingly significant events in the plot, and the deferral into the un-narrated future of those modes of social engagement (school, work) which generally signal maturation.
Contemporary human rights law is a universalising discourse, and one example of this is the way it assumes that, across the globe, citizenship in the nation-state can function as the mechanism of personality development, without considering the extent to which nation-state formations vary, or the serious difficulties this model is likely to encounter when the nation-state is in crisis (the very time at which rights protection becomes most essential). In the case of Waiting, it can be argued that the text’s undermining of the reader’s expectations of the Bildungsroman (progress, integration) works to emphasise the deferral of effective citizenship – and thus rights protection – in conflict. Slaughter makes a similar point in his analysis of Tununa Mercado’s In a State of Memory, set during the military dictatorships in Argentina. He argues that the ‘novel’s fragmented structure’ calls ‘into question the very possibility of formulating a traditional Bildungsroman story of personal incorporation when the state is disrupted.’

In addition to showing that personality development through citizenship only makes sense in particular kinds of nation-states, I suggest that Waiting’s experimentation with the genre of the Bildungsroman also makes a more radical critique of human rights discourse. It is not only that the fragile model of universal human rights protection through citizenship is seriously threatened by states in crisis; there is also a fundamental conceptual problem with the link between international human rights and the nation-state, the link that, according to Slaughter, the globalised Bildungsroman rationalises and disseminates. This problem has always faced the European democratic nation-state formation, but as human rights law seeks to universalise and globalise its interrelated model of personality development, is it a problem which the postcolonial Bildungsroman – frequently calling into question “classical” models, as Austen states – is particularly able to explore.
The family

In the idealist Bildungsroman, the central character’s development from childhood or youth to adulthood is typically dependent on the movement away from the family environment. Jerome Buckley argues that the protagonist, ‘sometimes at quite an early age, leaves the repressive atmosphere of home (and also the relative innocence), to make his way independently in the city.’ At the end of the text, ‘His initiation complete, he may then visit his old home, to demonstrate by his presence the degree of his success or the wisdom of his choice.’ By contrast, Waiting emphatically asserts the familial and presents it as inescapable: in particular, blood, the body and birth are repeatedly, excessively present across the text, often in surprising and unexpected ways.

From the beginning of the novel, Kaaka is described through reference to her stomach: ‘[h]er big stomach was visible through the long, loose dress she was wearing, and she seemed to be pushing it in front of her as she walked’ (p.9). This isn’t explained until much later in the novel, in chapter eleven, where the reader learns that when Kaaka, who is now ‘60 or 70’ (p.60), was young, she was pregnant without being married, and her mother took her to a medicine man to make the pregnancy invisible. Then,

[a]fter about a year of marriage Kaaka came back to tell her mother that she had failed to deliver the baby and that her stomach was still swollen. They went back to the medicine man, but unfortunately, he had long since died. Kaaka’s stomach remained swollen since that time (p.61).

At the beginning of the novel Alinda’s mother is pregnant and the baby is due imminently. The family is also waiting to see if Amin’s soldiers will arrive; the soldiers have been looting local villages and terrorising the inhabitants. In the end, the appearance of the soldiers and the birth of the baby coincide. As Kaaka begins to deliver Mother’s baby, the soldiers arrive and
attack Kaaka. Their violence is specifically focused; they kick Kaaka twice in the stomach and then shoot her: ‘he fired again, aiming at her stomach’ (p.38).

The murder of Kaaka is one of the novel’s most explicit scenes of political violence; the other is an incident in which an old man in the village steps on a landmine. In both cases, when she encounters the landmine and Kaaka’s death, Alinda is holding tightly to the baby or to something associated with the baby. After Kaaka is killed

Father rushed forward into the yard, something like a groan escaping from his lips. Kaaka was covered in blood. He bent over her. I was still clutching the plastic bag that contained the baby’s things when I ran inside the house to find Mother (p.39).

This scene has a close parallel later in the novel when Alinda sees the old man after he has stepped on the landmine:

[i]t did not look like a leg at all! From the knee downwards it was just a mass of red meat from which small pieces of white bone protruded […] Still holding the baby tightly in my arms, I started walking away, placing one foot in front of the other, slowly at first, then more quickly, until I had put a distance between my weary body and the scene of blood (p.67-68).

Twice, Alinda makes an escape from an overwhelming ‘scene of blood’ (p.68) whilst ‘holding […] tightly’ or ‘clutching’ something – in the first, the baby’s things, in the second the baby himself.

Not only is the baby placed at scenes of political violence, but Alinda also experiences the baby’s birth as deeply shocking and upsetting. The vocabulary used to
describe the birth links it with the violence of war. Alinda rushes to her mother as she is giving birth:

I could not see the cord. I feared to look at the jellied blood next to the baby

[...] Then I saw something like a fleshy string, coiling out of the bloody mess and winding its way to the baby’s stomach (p.41).

Alinda subsequently develops a fear of blood: she will not eat meat because she says that it ‘reminds me of blood – Mother’s afterbirth, and the old man’s leg’ (p.72). The afterbirth is here equivalent to, or at least connected with, the landmine in Alinda’s imagination. The experience of seeing the afterbirth also establishes its own pattern of imagery which repeats through the novel. She says: ‘I tried to get hold of the afterbirth, but it slipped through my fingers and fell back towards the baby. It danced around in the pool of blood seeping from Mother’s womb, swimming like an egg yolk’ (pp.41-42). Later, during the rains, she says that:

I dreamed that the roof of our house had flown off, and that water was soaking my bed. I was swimming in a puddle of water, and I was going to drown and die! I woke up in a cold sweat and did not fall asleep again until daybreak (p.106).

This dream repeats the language concerning the threat of seeping and of liquidity associated with the afterbirth, and suggests its traumatic impact. In part, here, the text is drawing attention to conventional hierarchies of violence and then upending them. There is a merging together, an entwining, of the war’s violence and the bloodiness of maternity. In this way the text refuses to characterise the violence visited on the female characters as solely the result of the unstable political situation and instead makes what often seems unexceptional and
everyday – the dangers of motherhood, patriarchal social norms, and childbirth – vivid and terrifying.

This train of imagery also disrupts the typical narrative arc of the Bildungsroman, and in so doing brings into focus some of the difficulties of the personality-development model of human rights. In the conventional Bildungsroman the process of development towards social incorporation is dependent on the movement away from home and family, and this plot-point occurs because of the way the political community of the liberal democratic nation-state tends to be conceptualised. Of course, individual psychological maturity is dependent on the ability to forge and sustain extra-familial relationships and this also explains the conventional plot in the coming of age novel. But the link the Bildungsroman makes between the development of social or civic identity and leaving the familial behind also reflects and re-entrenches what Carole Pateman has described as a well-established distinction in Western political thought between ‘two spheres’:

- civil society or the universal sphere of freedom, equality, individualism, reason, contract and impartial law – the realm of men or ‘individuals’; and
- the private world of particularity, natural subjection, ties of blood, emotion, love and sexual passion – the world of women, in which men also rule.  

She argues that ‘political life has been conceptualised in opposition to the mundane world of necessity, the body, the sexual passions and birth’ and is ‘created in separation from, and opposition to, the familial sphere.’ It is this way of thinking about political life which finds representation in the conventional plot of the Bildungsroman: the climactic moment of social integration is made possible by the movement away from home and family.

If the conventional Bildungsroman affirms the distinction between ‘the universal sphere of freedom’ and ‘the mundane world of necessity, the body, the sexual passions and
birth’, *Waiting* does the opposite. In particular, it makes birth and the body inescapable and overwhelming. In so doing, it draws attention to a contradiction which is inherent to, and destabilises, this distinction. Metaphors of birth abound in discussions of the political community of the liberal democratic nation-state. Pateman, for example, writes that

> [t]he social contract is the point of origin, or birth, of civil society, and simultaneously its separation from the (private) sphere of real birth and the disorder of women. The brothers give birth to an artificial body, the body politic of civil society; they create Hobbes’s ‘Artificial Man, we call a Commonwealth,’ or Rousseau’s ‘artificial and collective body’, or the ‘one Body’ or Locke’s ‘Body Politick’. The ‘birth’ of the civil body politic, however, is an act of reason; there is no analogue to a bodily act of procreation.41

In the story of the social contract, the participants are thought to make a conscious and free decision to join – this suggests that the links between the members of the community are constructed, invented and brought into being. Physical birth is considered to be the opposite of this artificial birth. This is because, as we have seen through Arendt, the artificial political community is based upon formal equality, where physical birth is associated with difference – that is, with the bonds which cannot be constructed. As Arendt writes:

> mere existence, that is, all that which is mysteriously given us by birth and which includes the shape of our bodies and talents of our minds, can be dealt with only by the unpredictable hazards of friendship and sympathy, or by the great and incalculable grace of love.42

The use of the metaphor of birth evinces a peculiar contradiction: it is used to mean what it does not mean. Pateman argues that when the metaphor of birth is used within social contract
theory it is used to suggest the artificiality of the political community and its constructed equality. To describe the coming into being of such a community, a term – birth – is used, which actually signifies everything to which the artificiality of the political sphere is opposed; physical birth signals ‘mere existence,’ givenness, ‘difference as such’.43

This indicates a wider slippage. For example, the sphere which is opposed to the familial tends to be given the name fraternity. Pateman, discussing ‘recent accounts of fraternity’ writes that

the concept covers much more than bonds of kinship. ‘Individuals’ can be part of a fraternity or a brotherhood – a ‘community’ – even though they are not brothers (sons of a father or kin) […] the participants in civil society have left kinship behind them.44

The political community brought into being through social contract is understood as a fraternity, even though this same political community is ‘created in separation from, and opposition to, the familial sphere.’45 Fraternity, a word which means a particular type of family bond, is used in such a way that it symbolises the opposite of the bonds of family. The equals who make the social contract are described as brothers, but this fraternity is not understood as familial.

If what is being signified is that ‘the participants in civil society have left kinship behind them’,46 why use a word – fraternity – which actually means kinship – that is, which means precisely what it does not mean? In dialogue with an excerpt from Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Experience of Freedom*, Jacques Derrida asks precisely this question:

why not simply abandon the word fraternity as well, now that it has been stripped of all its recognisable attributes? What does fraternity still name when
it has no relationship to birth, death, the father, the mother, sons and brothers?
If the link to the traditional word and concept is so arbitrary that one can abandon it, then why say nothing of the daughter and the sister – or the wife?
Where have they gone?47

Derrida suggests that the word ‘fraternity’ tends to be used as if does not imply the series of associations the brother customarily carries. The persistence of the word, its recurrence across so many theorisations of the democratic state, is nonetheless suggestive. He suggests that in retaining the word fraternity ‘to designate a fraternity beyond fraternity, a fraternity without fraternity (literal, strict, genealogical, masculine, etc.) one never renounces that which one claims to renounce – and which returns in myriad ways, through symptoms and disavowals’.48

In Derrida’s reading what underlies this privileging of the brother, this idea that there can be ‘fraternity without fraternity,’ is the question of sameness and difference in the democratic order:

democracy has always wanted by turns and at the same time two incompatible things: it has wanted, on the one hand, to welcome only men, and on the condition that they be citizens, brothers, and compeers [semblables], excluding all the others, in particular bad citizens, rogues, noncitizens, and all sorts of unlike and unrecognisable others, and, on the other hand, at the same time or by turns, it has wanted to open itself up, to offer hospitality, to all those excluded.49

As Derrida points out it ‘was never explained why one wished to hold on to and privilege this figure [of the brother] rather than that of the sister, the female cousin, the daughter, the wife or the stranger, or the figure of anyone or whoever.’50 We speak of the brother because the
democratic community has always desired sameness; partly, as Carole Pateman also argues, this is a question of maleness: democracy is figured as masculine. Derrida writes: ‘[I]et us not forget this overwhelming and therefore terribly blinding fact: the brother of which one speaks is always a man’.51

A democratic community based upon likeness also suggests the exclusivity of ethno-nationalism. Here we can return to Arendt:

[the reason why highly developed political communities, such as the ancient city-states or modern nation-states, so often insist on ethnic homogeneity is that they hope to eliminate as far as possible those natural and always present differences and differentiations which by themselves arouse dumb hatred, mistrust, and discrimination because they indicate all too clearly those spheres where men cannot act and change at will, i.e., the limitations of the human artifice.52

Brotherhood indicates likeness, and the drive to ‘eliminate […] differences’53 is closely associated with the desire for the community to be based upon the similarities of masculinity and ethnic resemblance. Using metaphors like fraternity and birth to describe the political community reveals, at the same time, the presence of that difference which is ostensibly being evaded – these metaphors return us to the ‘mystery’ of what is given, rather than the equality of what is created. Derrida proposes that the familial language conceptualising the political community of the liberal democratic nation-state reveals the contradiction or impasse which is inherent to that community – the simultaneous desire for similarity and for difference, for inclusion and also for race- and gender-based exclusion.

What, then, of human rights? The first sentence of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights describes humanity as a family: it says that ‘recognition of the inherent dignity
and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world." The family re-emerges in Article 1 by which time the familial language has become more particular: ‘[a]ll human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.’ International human rights discourse here repeats the fraternity metaphor characteristic of the democratic nation-state. In Slaughter’s account, contemporary human rights law attempts to build a global order of international human persons through citizenship in the nation-state, but the presence of the language of brotherhood in the UDHR suggests the continued significance of the problem symbolised by the contradictory term ‘fraternity,’ the problem that the use of imagery of blood and birth in the experimental Bildungsroman Waiting renders so vividly in literary terms.

Slaughter links the Bildungsroman and human rights discourse because he argues that both understand belonging to the nation-state as a crucial condition for human personality development. Waiting, like many of the examples Slaughter examines, employs the genre of the Bildungsroman ambivalently, but the particularity of its experiments reward closer scrutiny. The novel’s insistent, excessive familial language can be interpreted in multiple ways. Reading it against Slaughter’s idea that the Bildungsroman disseminates human rights norms internationally, what becomes apparent is a tension between the plot-logic of the genre, towards social identity, and the imagery of blood and birth which is suggestive of, in Pateman’s words, everything ‘political life has been conceptualised in opposition to’. This tension draws attention to a well-established fault-line in conceptualisations of the democratic nation-state. Derrida states that ‘[t]he concept of politics rarely announces itself without some sort of adherence of the State to the family.’ This adherence is contradictory. Fraternity and birth are intended to symbolise the formal equality and similarity of the political sphere – and thus they imply the desire for the eradication of difference which can produce exclusions
based on gender and race. At the same time, though, the family suggests the difference of
birth, the given identity opposed to the constructed equality of the political sphere, the
‘realms in which man cannot change and cannot act and in which, therefore, he has a distinct
tendency to destroy.’58 This contradiction is an irresolvable one, Derrida argues, integral to
the way the democratic community of the nation-state is formulated.

Therefore, rather than promulgating or ambivalently critiquing human rights norms,
Waiting’s use of the Bildungsroman genre works to expose a serious conceptual impasse in
nation-centred versions of human rights discourse. If the global Bildungsroman and human
rights discourse are analogous, as Slaughter suggests, then the variations on the
Bildungsroman that Waiting adopts reveal the dangers of a model of human rights which
adopts nation-statist forms, legal or literary. It suggests that the contradictions which have
long haunted national political community and in fact prompted the development of
international human rights discourse – the democratic community’s contradictory desires for
sameness and difference, exclusion and inclusion, the fraught question of who really belongs,
the brother or the stranger? – simply re-emerge in human rights’ international order.

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5 Boes, Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Bildungsroman, p.25.


12 Ibid., p.22.


14 Ibid., p.301.


18 There are some exceptions to this, known as jus cogens norms. Torture, for example, is always illegal under international law, regardless of treaty law ratification.


20 Ibid., p.58.

21 Ibid., p.84.


25 Ibid., p.123.

26 Ibid., p.37.
27 Ibid., p.39.
28 Ibid., p.32.
29 Ibid., p.181.
31 Ibid., p.201.
33 Goretti Kyomuhendo, *Waiting: A Novel of Uganda at War* (New York: Feminist Press, 2007), n.p. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be provided in-text.
37 Ibid., p.18.
39 Ibid., p.45.
40 Ibid., p.42.
41 Ibid., pp. 45-46.
43 Ibid., p.301.
44 Pateman, *Disorder of Women*, p.42.
46 Ibid., p.42.
50 Ibid., p.58.
51 Ibid., p.60.


53 Ibid., p.301.

54 Preamble, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted 10 December 1948), UDHR, available at: 


55 UDHR, art.1.

56 Pateman, *Disorder of Women*, p.45.
