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Diaspora, Desire, and Defiance: A Feminist Reading of Our Sister Killjoy

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If you educate a man, you educate an individual; if you educate a woman you educate a nation.
— Kavegya Aggrey

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Abstract

This paper examines Our Sister Killjoy by Ama Ata Aidoo as a significant feminist and postcolonial text that foregrounds the question of women's identity, autonomy, and socio-cultural responsibility. Situating the narrative within the context of African feminism, the study explores the protagonist Sissie's journey as both a physical and psychological odyssey that interrogates Western materialism, colonial hangovers, and gendered oppression. The paper highlights how Aidoo critiques patriarchal structures embedded in African society while simultaneously exposing the hollowness of Western modernity. Through Sissie's encounters in Europe and her eventual return to Africa, the novel articulates a resistance to cultural alienation and affirms the importance of rootedness, self-definition, and ideological commitment. Special emphasis is laid on the politics of gender relations, the concept of the "New Woman," and the interplay between emotional and intellectual autonomy. The concluding section of the novel, particularly "A Love Letter," is read as a powerful articulation of selfhood, where personal sacrifice becomes a site of resistance and affirmation. The study argues that Aidoo envisions a transformative role for women in postcolonial societies—one that is grounded in cultural consciousness, political awareness, and economic independence. By blending narrative experimentation with ideological critique, Our Sister Killjoy emerges as a compelling text that not only reflects the struggles of African women but also proposes a framework for their emancipation and self-realization.

Keywords**: **Feminism, Identity, Autonomy, Patriarchy, Diaspora, Colonialism, Alienation, Resistance, Selfhood, Emancipation

INTRODUCTION

Ama Ata Aidoo, like her Ghanaian sister Efua Sutherland, has promoted her culture's traditions through her writing and her post as Ghana's Minister of Culture and Education in the early 1980s. Aidoo's works highlight her social vision, her commitment to writing oral literature, and her desire to create a more integrated African society. Aidoo's social vision includes the betterment of women's position, as well as a global concern for the liberation of Black people everywhere. It is this deep love that she feels for her people that informs all her writing: I don't know how people react when they leave Africa and go to places outside where there are concentrations of other Black peoples, but for me it was incredible. I just couldn't believe that I could cross the whole of Atlantic and go and find all of these people who are like people at home… You can't cover up history… It is time we faced the question of what happened that so many of us are in Harlem and so many in the West Indies… You see grief accepted is grief overcome(Wilentz 39).

As an African feminist, she illustrates the piteous condition of women in Ghanaian society: "Inspite of Ghana's renowned status as a matrilineal society, men have been the main architects and beneficiaries of family and inheritance laws. The matrilineal system merely guarantees that nephews will inherit from their uncles through the female line. Wealth continues to be confined to males" (Gyamfuaa-Fofie 40). Women are constantly suppressed, and a lot of local sayings remind them that they live in a man's world: obaa to two etwene barima dan mu (if a woman buys a gun, she must keep it in the room of a man); se obaa yen odwan a barima na oton (when a woman rears a sheep, the man must sell it). For decades, Ghanaian women have been excluded from the decision-making processes affecting their lives and have accepted social attitudes and expectations with surrender. Girls are socialized into the

knowledge that marrying successful men is the only key to achieving success; the logic of a woman becoming successful through self-confidence and hard work is rarely credited. Orthodox religion in Ghana offers fewer opportunities to women. Christianity discriminates against women from being trained as ministers, no matter how wise and mature they are. Pentecostal churches insist that women address husbands as 'my lord'. Even Islam in West Africa is prejudiced against women, depriving them of leadership roles in its bid to promote male authority and female submission. Aidoo asserts her Ghanaian friends to rise and become aware of their talents and to adapt their minds to take up positions of authority, instating themselves as role models for their female inheritors. She envisions a role for women that blends traditional culture with a global perspective. Ama Ata Aidoo has revisited the history of Ghana and opened fresh pages wherein women can write their names. She urges her fellow women to identify their priorities and form a united front with shared goals, transforming an unpleasant and exploitative past into a meaningful future. Sexual politics becomes the organizing principle in the form and style of Aidoo's works. Like Flora Nwapa, she also utilizes her culture's orature in her writings and emphasizes the way in which women pass on and maintain the traditional values and customs of their society. Maryse Conde (Wilentz, 44) comments that the works of Aidoo and Nwapa illustrate that the African woman has an important role to play in the future of Africa and, in the past, it was the same.

Aidoo is recognized and eulogized for her forthrightness as a writer who has opened fresh pages of a book in which women can write and restructure their lives. Her novel Changes elucidates the struggle of Opokuya; a working-class woman who is primarily concerned with material restraints to her independence. She has a stable marriage which is frequently plagued by constant battles with her husband over the control of the car, which becomes a symbol of freedom and a material necessity for her to be able to fulfill her role as a working woman, a mother, and a wife, and also to assert herself against male sexism. The title of the novel, Our Sister Killjoy, appropriately sets the tone for the thematic development, i.e., the self-actualization of Sissie. 'Our Sister' is 'Our Sissie', for in Africa, Sissie is synonymous with Sister. By adding the pronoun 'Our' to Sister, Aidoo has made Sissie a universal character, an African everywoman, "forever carrying Africa's problems on her shoulders as though they have paid her to do it." (Aidoo 118). Like Flora Nwapa's heroines, Idu and Efuru, Sissie dominates the novel not just as an individual woman but as a symbol of African womanhood.

Sissie is made to believe that she was "unbelievably lucky to have been chosen for the trip" to Europe with a group of young Africans. She travels first to Germany and then to England. In London, she encounters young Africans who had come to the West for a good education, but trapped by the glitter of Western materialism, have decided not to return to Africa. Sissie tries to convince them of the need to return home, but her outspoken political and ideological beliefs alienate them. She eventually decides to go back to Africa. Katherine Frank 29 states: Sissie is an African everywoman and the novel charts her solitary odyssey towards freedom. Killjoy spurns all the easy lures that would compromise her integrity; however reluctantly, she rejects both lesbian and heterosexual love and also the comfortable, prosperous existence of exile in London. Most importantly, Sissie keeps faith with herself as a woman and an African. Sissie is a powerful figure whose journey could be viewed as a 'transit between Africa and Europe'. Like Buchi Emecheta's heroine, Debbie Ogedemgbe in Destination Biafra, Sissie too welcomes a future without men. She is the quintessential "New Woman". It appears Aidoo has fallen in love with her protagonist, Sissie. Her actions, her confidence, her concern for her brothers and sisters, and her patriotism give her all the magnanimity she deserves; and that is the reason why she is called 'Our Sister Killjoy'. She says:

Oh, it is just a beautiful way they call 'Sister' by people who like you very much. Especially, if there are not many girl babies in the family… one of the very few ways where an original concept from our old ways has been given expression successfully in English (28). The narrative structure of the novel is designed to celebrate Sissie's dynamic consciousness: "Aidoo's narrative is complex and subversive… employing the female point of view, her techniques carry her outcry against sexism. She also employs the trope of madness as she focuses on her mad country and her madder continent of supposedly independent nature" (Opara 137). Like Buchi Emecheta, Aidoo uses a deflationary language for men and an inflationary one towards her protagonists, and creates exemplary females who grow in strength like Sissie, and male caricatures like Kunle who degenerate to mere absurdities. The language of Our Sister Killjoy symbolizes the conversational speech style of the "new woman" who dabbles in world politics. The novel is mostly narrated by Sissie, and authorial intrusion is minimal, but Aidoo makes ironic comments at times, for example, when Sissie rejects Marija's invitation to dinner. She thinks:

"It is not sound for a woman to enjoy cooking for another woman. Not under any circumstances. It is not done. It is not possible. Special meals are for men. They are the only sex to whom the maker gave mouth with which to enjoy eating. And woman, the eternal cook, is never so pleased as seeing a man enjoying what she has cooked; eh, Marija?

So, give the rabbit to Big Adolf and watch him enjoy it. For me sake. And better still, for you sake." (77) By using a composite of poetry, prose, first-person narration, commentary, gory humour, and searing irony in the novel, Aidoo reflects on the diverse reproductive and productive roles played by women in society. The hidden insights in the novel bring us face to face with the fundamental historical facts of a crippling colonial heritage. Aidoo makes her protagonist contemplate the possibilities of male-female relationships in postcolonial Africa. Hence, the narrative could be seen as a novel within a novel. It enacts two levels of representation: the surface reality as narrated by Sissie and the insights into its historical references and deeper undercurrents contained in her subconscious reflections. The author wishes to affirm that maleness and femaleness in an African context need to be defined in relation to time and history. The story is a third-person narration. The commencing pages of the novel anxiously encompass conversational observations about neo-colonial and moderate Blacks and pseudo-intellectual Blacks. Aidoo begins with optimism:

Things are working out…
towards their dazzling conclusions…
…so it is neither here nor there (3,4,5).

She develops a strong bond with the readers by making them share her concern about the plight of her protagonist. She addresses the reader as 'my brother' and thus transforms him from a spectator into a participant in an intense exploration of the voids between African and Western values. The novel has a complex plot, which is a mixture of prose, poetry, song, and sketch. In the narrative, we perceive things through the Black eyes of Sissie. In fact, she is the sole reflector in the novel. Aidoo has made a meticulous endeavour to use female characters as forceful and imposing voices in her works. Aidoo has divided the book into four parts: (a) Into a Bad Dream (b) The Plums (c) From Our Sister Killjoy and (d) A Loveletter. Each part deals with a specific phase of Sissie's odyssey of the self.

"Into a Bad Dream"

The first section of the book, 'Into a Bad Dream', talks about a cruel past, a funny present, a major desert or two, an ocean, several different languages apart, and aeroplanes bridging the skies (8). To be selected for a trip to Europe by Ghana officials is like a 'dress rehearsal for a journey to paradise.' Sissie is feted at a party thrown in her honour. She is surprised to see one of the guests narrating the wonders of Europe to her: "…he spoke their language well… in a way that made her feel uneasy. Our Sister shivered and fidgeted in her chair" (9). The selection is followed by three pages containing one word each: "where", "when", "how", symbolising action and connecting it to the second section called "The Plums". These three words are symbolic as they convey "where" Sissie went, "when" she finally returned, and "how" she spent her time in Europe. Arlene Elder (112) says that these three terms are statements and are like subject headings in a book.

"The Plums"

"The Plums" begins with a poetic passage as Sissie visits a German castle. The passage is a satire on a defunct European aristocracy and the hollow superficiality of the so-called German hausfrau. This section highlights the troubled relationship between Sissie and a German housewife, Marija. Sissie and Marija seem to represent two opposite cultures. The character of Marija is a clear criticism of Western culture, which stresses personal gratification, sexual licence, and materialism. Sissie, on the other hand, represents humanism, family values, and community life. She rejects the glossy exterior of Western life because her relationship with Marija allows her to see its hollow interior. Aidoo has powerfully exposed the intensity of 'white colour', associating it with the 'light of the dying summer-sun'. The Marija episode "represents a contrasting evocation of male-female relationship in a context where the barrier against fulfillment is not a colonial heritage that shackles thought and destroys meaningful communication, but a new materialism" (Wilson-Tagoe 25–26).

The story of Sissie and that of Marija intersect to show how Ama Ata Aidoo relates herself both to the microcosm of women's world and to the wider macrocosm around her. Marija's tale of dissatisfaction is aptly played out against "the background of the thick smoke that was like a rain cloud over the chimneys of Europe" (65). The two women share a bond of "common loneliness", but while Marija is sucked into the vortex, Sissie is able to rise above it because of her political and personal commitments. Marija's alienation from her husband and society is symbolised by the tear forever falling from her eye. Her 'uncertain eyes', 'her restless hands', and 'biting of her lips' signify "as though the maker had fashioned the body of a human, stuffed it into a polythene bag instead of the regular protective covering, and turned it loose into the world" (76). The title of this section, "The Plums", is significant.

Sissie had seen plums for the first time in Frankfurt. Aidoo remarkably associates the sweetness and liveliness of the plums with the vigorous qualities possessed by Sissie:

Youthfulness
Peace of mind
Feeling free
Knowing you are a rare article,
Being loved (40).

Thus, the image of the plums throughout the chapter is used to portray the intrinsic qualities of Sissie. The plums symbolise activity and strength; like Sissie, they too undergo growth: "Marija picked each lot about twenty-four hours ahead and kept them in a polythene bag, a process that softened the plums and also rid them of their fresh tangy taste, preserving a soothing sweetness" (40). It is the plums that bring Marija closer to Sissie, and Sissie is called "The Bringer-of-Goodies-After-Lights-Out" by her fellow campers. Initially, Marija is the harbinger of plums, but eventually they become the forbidden fruit for Sissie. She rejects Marija's overtures for a lesbian relationship: "…impulsively, Sissie shook herself free… where now a young Aryan wife kisses a young Black woman with such desperation…?" (64). She advises Marija to cook a special meal for Big Adolf and create a harmonious relationship with her husband and family. Her final goodbye to Marija symbolises her disassociation from the decadent culture that Marija represents.The disillusionment with Western materialism continues in the third part of the novel. Sissie is anguished to see Africans in London rejecting the stability of African culture for a moribund Western society.

"From Our Sister Killjoy"

The third section 'From Our Sister Killjoy' thus, unveils the false impressions and deceitfulness of the 'been-tos' who are the native Africans. What Sissie was distressed to see was that the African had lost himself in an alien environment and was denuded of his sense of self. She was deeply anguished to see the pathetic state of Blacks crippled in an alien land which was totally contradictory to the rosy picture that had been painted for her, "they appeared to be so wretched, she wondered why they stayed…Mothers pushing their babies in second hand carriages while their men toiled the long day through as drivers, porters…Sissie bled as she tried to take the scene in" (85). She wondered why these 'been tos' never told the truth of their travels at home because it was very ironic that 'they seem to be running very fast just to remain where they were'. Sissie became a 'Killjoy' for the 'been tos' because she was constantly pricking their self-created bubble of a western paradise. Aidoo paints a lucid picture of Black women in London in their cheap and gaudy clothes:

A blue craft…
A brown coat with…synthetic fibre
…A red sweater with a button missing
…A pair of cheap shoes… (89).

The slovenly dress of these women reflects their second class status in society. They were taking courses in dress making, hair dressing and were not involved in responsible jobs which proved that they were simply living in the shadow of their spouses and unlike Sissie were unable to fracture stereotyped images allotted to women. Aidoo uses her comic sarcasm as a tool to expose postcolonial inequities as in her portrayal of the large hearted, gullible sexist, Kunle. Sissie disagreed with Kunle's views about a news item which glorified the heart transplant where hearts from coloured South Africans were used in transplant. The Doctor is characterized as a barbarian and Kunle as a wheel that can be rotated in any direction:

Yes, Kunle's heart stayed in
His Chest, too strong to be
Affected by anything else…
…Stopping only when
The flames had swallowed it up…
For it certainly would have gladdened Kunle's heart to find
Itself in the hands of the Christian Doctor (42).

Kunle's mother represents those poor and helpless mothers who wait in vain for their sons to return from abroad and make them prosperous.

"A Love Letter"

The concluding section of the novel, "A Love Letter" draws us closer to the protagonist as it is here that she is directly talking to the readers, laying bare her innermost thoughts. In Our Sister Killjoy, Aidoo extends the politics of gender relations in more complex ways. By placing love within the sphere of politics, Sissie insists that love cannot be meaningful unless it can contend with that monumental power and lure of Europe, which threatens the survival of African identity. Love for Sissie was not a surface physical bonding but the creation of a new language that would overcome colonial destructive history, and revive that was valuable in African culture to counter the gross materialism of the west. Her boyfriend made fun of her patriotic feelings when he said that it seemed she had been paid to carry 'Africa's problems on her shoulders'. Sissie decided to hold on to her political convictions and give up her lover, rather than compromise with the quality of love. She commenced her letter with a complaint of language: My precious something, First of all, there is this language…I have been able to use a language that enslaved me, and therefore the messengers of my mind always come shackled (112).

She was writing the epistle on her plane returning to Africa, to her beloved, whom she still loved. His professionalism (because he was working as a doctor in London and was materialistic) and her close affinity to her motherland separated them as she decided to sacrifice love for country. She recalled how her beloved always advised her to have a positive approach towards life. His attitude was chauvinistic; Sissie was well-informed about her man's reaction to her letter. He felt Sissie to be too politically radical for him. In fact, the letter is written not as a plea to her lover to come to her but it is an outpouring of the emotional bereavement she felt at being separated from him. So, by putting her pain in her words, Sissie was seeking a catharsis for it and was ready to face the future in a positive frame of mind. Sissie feels helpless to have fallen in love with a 'been to' who has no intention of returning home. Her wrenching love letter is a sub-conscious catharsis of her feelings, because she has no intention of posting the letter. She says, "Indeed, if there is anyone I may have sinned against, it is me…they say that any female in my position would have thrown away everything to be with you, and remain with you…oh deliciously naive me. What did I rather do, but daily and loudly criticise you and your friends for wanting to stay forever in alien places?" (117). Her sense of loneliness is echoed in the cold London weather. She stressed that these cold countries were embroidered by a kind of loneliness which prohibited anyone to be themselves' man, chicken or goat.' In fact, Sissie was headstrong and was unable to be subservient to her 'Lost heart' as she called him:

"May be I regret that I could not shut up and meekly look up to you even when I know I disagreed with you. But you see nobody had taught me such meekness. And I wish, they had" (119).

Aidoo's heroine is sentimental about her relationship and thus suffers and grieves over her breakup with her "precious something". The last few pages return to the third person narration. Sissie was flying back to Africa; her wonder thoughts about leaving her beloved diminished as she gazed at the land unfolding before her: "Dry land, trees, a swamp, more dry land, green, green, lots of green" (133). Dry land symbolises infertility and roughness but Aidoo is hopeful as she focuses on dryness as a symbol of fertility and life compared to the cold and snow of Europe which symbolises death and decay. She is optimistic as she had already promised in the beginning of the narrative:

Things are working out
towards their dazzling conclusions…
…so it is neither here nor there (3,4,5).

Sissie was overwhelmed at the very glimpse of her crazy continent. Her return to Africa nourished her and made her more vibrant, "…she was back in Africa, and that felt like fresh honey on tongue-a mixture of complete sweetness and smoky roughage. Below was home with its unavoidable warmth" (Aidoo 133). Heat, colour, growth, renewal—in short, life—are what await Sissie as she touches down home. Her geographical voyage has mirrored a parallel internal one (Frank 32). The novel is a complete description of Aidoo's concern for a deep understanding of the fate of women in society. Sissie has suffered, she has been distressed, she has wept but eventually emerged as a whole person. She is an African woman proud of her colour and heritage. She declines the myth "that the only thing Black people can do is to entertain…Run, jump and sing" (129).

Nana Wilson Tagoe (25–26) describes Sissie as a highly politicized and very aware female who tries to resolve the conflicts about her instincts and her mind. Aidoo uses Sissie to explore a binary opposition of race and gender in two episodes which are crucial to the development of the plot. First, Sissie vanquishes her weak opponent,

Marija in a racial and cultural war. Her decision to leave her lover and return to Africa makes her victorious in the war of the sexes. Despite her wish to be a man sometimes, Sissie remains a woman. Like Virginia Woolf, Aidoo's work aspires towards an "androgynous selfhood" of male and female fusion. Aidoo sees the realization of non-sexist cultural norms as pivotal to female individuation. Promoting female bonding and financial independence, Aidoo delineates an agenda for female emancipation. Her tone is discursive and politicised; a militant female writer, she strives to arouse our consciences while taking a critical glimpse at the newly awakened African woman.(Opara 142)

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