

The stranger abroad: ideology and impotence in our sister killjoy



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Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*: or Reflections from a Black-eyed Squint follows a young Ghanaian woman known as Sissie and her experiences in Europe. As Aidoo's story floats from reflections on Sissie's sexually charged relationship with a Swiss woman to the emotional letter she pens as her plane hurdles back toward Africa, *Our Sister Killjoy* is a complex literary mosaic brimming with social commentary. Yet while the lack of narrative cohesion and the disparate depictions of Sissie's time abroad does not culminate in any dramatic resolution or simplistic final meaning, it is this inconclusiveness that powerfully exemplifies *Our Sister Killjoy*'s inability to extricate Sissie from the ideologies she so vehemently rails against. *Our Sister Killjoy* is not only a condemnation of the cultural values and social structures the narrative explores, but it is also a damning depiction of an eloquent protagonist whose own impotence is ultimately representative of the reader's. Before delving into social issues that are firmly situated in a specific cultural moment, *Our Sister Killjoy* opens with an enigmatic collection of sentences spanning multiple pages. Dramatically formatted with no discernible pattern, Aidoo writes: " Things are working out... towards their dazzling conclusions... so it is neither here nor there, what ticky-tackies we have saddled ourselves with, blocked our views, cluttered our brains" (Aidoo 3-5). Here, Aidoo immediately establishes a relationship with the reader that is fundamental to understanding how the entire text functions. Her usage of " we," without any narrative detail to contextualize this language, establishes a link between the unidentified speaker and the individual consuming the text. In this sense, " we" refers directly to the reader; it is not just the text's characters who suffer from blocked brains and cluttered views, but the individual who turns these pages is also seemingly

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guilty of this distorted perspective. It is also notable that Aidoo avoids language that would indicate any specific historical landscape; the line that refers to “ticky-tackies” can certainly be read as evoking the meaninglessness of contemporary Western materialism, but remains broad enough that the aforementioned interpretation could in no way be definitively argued. As the narrative evolves from its multivalent opening to establishing the specifics surrounding Aidoo’s protagonist as she departs from Ghana and lives abroad, Sissie’s experiences in Germany seem to function only as a literary groundwork for the destabilizing perceptions of Western culture that permeate the text. A passage that is particularly illustrative of this takes place just before Marija, an acquaintance of Sissie’s, attempts an awkward sexual advance. As Sissie searches for a way to remove herself from Marija’s home and return to her hostel, she becomes once again aware of her surroundings, “a world where the need to pay mortgages and go on holidays [keep] married chambers empty for strangers’ inspection” (62). Here, the unnamed narrator mounts a powerful assault on the traditional conception of marriage; while the mention of mortgages could relegate this passage to a simplistic, albeit elegant, decrial of the challenges of financial necessity, the reference to “the need... to go on holidays” is especially compelling. In this formulation, Marija’s husband is rarely at home as he strives to afford the common sense notion of marriage, in which holidays are supposedly a necessity, to the point that it limits and undermines his actual marriage. In other words, the ideology of marriage directly hinders the reality of marriage. This selection is in no way unique in *Our Sister Killjoy*, rather it is noteworthy in that it is strong example of many similar asides throughout the narrative which focus on a diverse range of

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topics, spanning the emptiness of academic institutions to the endless complexities of post-colonial Africa. Additionally, the reference to Sissie as a “stranger” is especially pertinent to this discussion; it is specifically this Otherness that enables her to identify the hypocrisies in the ideology of marriage. While Sissie’s role as a stranger to Europe is integral to her ability to function outside of the ideologies Marija exists within, this unique position in no way frees Sissie from the values or institutions that inform her perception. Louis Althusser, a Marxist critic whose influential essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” has had a notable effect on modern literary criticism, argues that all individuals are subjects within and of ideology (Belsey 54). Although specific ideologies may vary drastically depending on the cultural or historical context, every individual is always and already a subject (Belsey 54). While this characterization of Althusser’s conception of ideology is quite simplistic, Althusser’s general theoretical framework is helpful to understanding Sissie’s complex social position; like Marija, Sissie is also immersed in a number of ideologies she herself cannot identify, yet since the narrative perspective remains focused on Sissie, the reader, much like Sissie, is limited to criticizing foreign and identifiable ideologies. Although Aidoo’s effort to craft a protagonist who somehow transcends the ideology-subject dialectic is undoubtedly valiant (an overt example of this is the author’s constant play with the nature of Sissie’s name), she is ultimately unable to disentangle her character, and consequently the reader, from the omnipresence of ideology. While Sissie is also inextricably entangled in systems of thought much like the ones she criticizes, one would be hard-pressed to conclusively locate and identify these since the reader is also limited to these ideologies. Although Aidoo

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presents perspectives that attempt to counter many common sense notions, notable examples of this being the value of education or the nobility of Western medicine, these arguments are also rooted in specific, albeit harder to name, ideologies. Yet the overarching point remains: Sissie's strangeness allows her to deconstruct ideologies she does not subscribe to, yet she is as much a subject as Marija or any other character in the text. In this sense, Sissie's only power is her ability to articulate and communicate the flaws in these notions. Aidoo seems to implicitly acknowledge this in the final moments of the text, as Sissie rereads a letter that she has just finished composing. Aidoo writes: "[Sissie] was never going to post the letter. Once written, it was written... There was no need to mail it. It was not necessary" (Aidoo 133). Within the context of this discussion, this small decision seems to reframe the entire text; Sissie is unable to enact any change in the reality she so desperately criticizes, since as she destabilizes prevalent Western ideologies she only perpetuates others. Here, if meaning or purpose exists in Aidoo's work, it only resides in the fleeting briefness of writing or describing. If Aidoo's protagonist were to send the letter, she would risk having her status as a subject and agent of other ideologies recognized and would undoubtedly " get caught up in a lot of metaphysical crap" (129). When considered within the context of the narrative's opening lines, Sissie's inevitable hypocrisy also indicts the reader of *Our Sister Killjoy*. Like Sissie, as the reader either passionately agrees with the text's ever present social commentary or fervently argues against it, the reader is continuing to function within some system of ideologies. And although these ideologies may differ dramatically, the reader and Sissie are still utterly unable to escape this framework.

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