

**Counter-Discursive Strategies in
Postcolonial African Novel: Revisiting
the Peripheries in Ama Ata Aidoo's
*Our Sister Killjoy***

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Abstract

The racial stereotypical image of the African as an inferior savage standing as an obstacle in the way of civilization has been established and perpetuated in Western literature, art and media throughout centuries. Within the theoretical framework of colonialism/postcolonialism, eurocentrism, orientalism, deconstruction and other interdisciplinary fields, this research paper intends to highlight the role of the postcolonial African novel, as counter-discourse, in deconstructing the colonial narrative and challenging stereotypes with a special focus on Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*. It intends to show how the postcolonial writers, by 'writing back to the Empire', have protested against Western ways of categorizing others and adopted a counter discourse to assert the invalidity of colonial discourse with a view to eliminate the negative image of the colonized people in Western arts and literature. Taking Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* as a case-

in-point, the study shows how the writer subverts and deconstructs the colonial discourse by challenging stereotypes about the colonized Other, especially the Ghanaians. Through a descriptive analytical method, Aidoo's novel has been critically examined to show how colonial stereotypes, perpetuated by history, media and literature, play a great role in affecting ones perception of the Other, sustain racial prejudice throughout history and result in misunderstanding among different cultures. The study concludes with a recommendation for a new strategy of writing/reading literature in which canonical and non-canonical texts should be written/read in such a way that promotes racial and gender harmony, equality, dialogue among cultures and global peace.

Key Terms: Colonialism, Postcolonialism, Counter-Discourse, Stereotypes, Orientalism, Discursive Strategies, Deconstruction

تجليات الخطاب المضاد في رواية ما بعد الاستعمارية الأفريقية: إعادة النظر في وضع فئة الهوامش في رواية "أختنا كيلجوي" للكاتبة أما آتا أيدو

الملخص :

دور الكاتبة في تحدي التجسيد النمطي لصورة الآخر الإفريقي/الغاني في الأدب الغربي الحديث حيث يُظهر البحث بنجاح كيف أن تجسيد الصورة النمطية الإستعمارية في كتب التاريخ والآداب والفنون الغربية يشجع على تكوين صورة مغلوطة عن الآخر ويتسبب في توليد التحيز العنصري و يعزز الخلاف والصراع بين الثقافات. أعمدت هذه الدراسة في التحليل النقدي المتعمق للرواية المذكورة على المنهج الوصفي التحليلي في ضوء النظريات النقدية الحديثة مثل نظرية الإستعمارية/ ما بعد الإستعمارية والمركزية الأوربية ونظرية الإستشراق والتفكيكية وغيرها من النظريات الحديثة ذات الصلة ومدعماً ببعض الدراسات السابقة في مجال الدراسات النقدية في رواية ما بعد الإستعمارية. ويختتم البحث بتقديم توصية لكتابة النصوص الأدبية وقراءتها بطريقة تنبذ التحيز والعنصرية وتدعوا إلى تغليب لغة الحوار والتسامح والسلام على أسلوب المواجهة بين الأثناء والآخر.

يهدف هذا البحث الى توضيح دور رواية ما بعد الإستعمارية (ما بعد الكولونيالية) في تحدي الصور النمطية عن الآخر الإفريقي في الآداب الغربية. طبقت الدراسة على رواية "أختنا كيلجوي" للكاتبة الغانية أما آتا أيدو. وتهدف هذه الدراسة الى تسليط الضوء على التوجه الإستعماري والتصوير المتحيز للآخر الإفريقي في الخطاب الإستعماري وتوضيح الغرض من وراء التجسيد النمطي لصورة الآخر الإفريقي في الآداب والفنون الغربية الحديثة ، كما يركز البحث على توضيح تجليات الخطاب المضاد في رواية ما بعد الاستعمارية الأفريقية من خلال دراسة نقدية لحالة فئة الهوامش في رواية "أختنا كيلجوي" للكاتبة أما آتا أيدو. وتوضح هذه الدراسة كيف استخدمت المؤلفة أسلوب الخطاب المضاد في الكتابة الأدبية للرد على طريقة طرح الكُتاب الأوربيين والنظرة الإستعمارية المتجذرة في الآداب والفنون الغربية، متخذةً من ذلك خطاباً مضاداً للخطاب الإستعماري العنصري المتحيز لتأكيد بطلانه ودحض الصورة السلبية التي يكونها عن الآخر، كما توضح الدراسة

1. Introduction

Post-colonial studies and works by authors from former colonies have become highly demanded all over the world by many academics and readers, as well. In fact, post-colonial literary production flourished in the second half of the twentieth century in connection with the process of decolonization which formerly colonized nations longed for after their independence. Postcolonial writers have chosen the role of spokespersons in order to give their individual response to the histories of their nations affected by the imperial politics of world powers. The pen has become their modern weapon by means of which they are able to 'write back', reconstruct their national and personal identities and give their formerly silenced peoples a new voice. They find writing in English as a tool to tell their narrative in a language that can access a broader readership, beyond the national borders. By this, they try to initiate a dialogic process between them and their ex-masters and to tell the rest of the world of the destructive forces of colonialism and imperialism. In this regard, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin assert that:

By appropriating the imperial language, its discursive forms and its modes of representation, post-colonial societies are able, as things stand, to intervene more readily in the dominant discourse, to interpolate their own cultural realities, or use that dominant language to describe those realities to a wide audience of readers. (*Post-Colonial Studies* 16)

Writing in English not only allows these writers to challenge the Westerners' misconceptions about their lands but also to counter the discursive authenticity of various cultural and social presumptions about the non-Western Third World countries.

Following the same tradition, postcolonial African novels have become real weapons used to dismantle the hegemonic boundaries and determinants that create unequal relations of power, based on binary oppositions such as 'Us and Them', 'First World and Third World', 'White and Black', 'Colonizer and Colonized', etc. Accordingly, many postcolonial African novelists have purposely used their literary works to facilitate the transgression of boundaries and subversion of hegemonic rigidities previously mapped out in precursor literary canonical texts about Africa and

the Africans. By doing so, these writers create a counter-narrative to Western hegemonic discourse and represent a case for liberal African intellectuals.

As a case study, this paper intends to show how the postcolonial novel, through appropriate use of language, reconstructs the world in accordance with the experience of the postcolonial writer. It intends to critically examine the novel with a view to show how Aidoo succeeds in deconstructing the Eurocentric colonial discourse and reverses the order of colonial binaries. It specifically intends to explain how the writer, in the process of creating a counter-discourse, has challenged colonial stereotypes of the Africans, especially the Ghanaians. It also illustrates how Aidoo offers a different type of African encounter with Europe that challenges the ideal image of Europe and the Africans' adulation of the Europeans. In other words, this research paper, in its attempt to expose the reality of colonial discourse, seeks to answer the following questions: How does the postcolonial novel play a major role in counteracting colonial discourse and challenging stereotypes of colonized people throughout history with special reference to Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*? How does Aidoo, as a postcolonial writer, assert the invalidity of colonial discourse and creates a counter-discourse that protests against Western ways of categorizing people? In other words, how does Aidoo, in the process of writing back, counteract or resist the stereotypes colonizers invented of her people, history, or culture, showing how stereotyping can sustain racism and lead to prejudice and bigotry?

The study draws its significance from the significant role of postcolonial literature in countering colonial discourse and fighting stereotypes through generations in different times and places. It illustrates the significant role of the postcolonial novel, particularly the African, in challenging the superiority of the West with a view to assert the invalidity of their groundless claims. It shows how generations have been suffering from stereotyping since the colonization era and still suffering until the present day and how such colonial attitudes negatively affect human relationships in the whole world today. Thus, by analyzing the given stereotypes in the novel and examining how the writer challenges such stereotypes, the significant role of the postcolonial literature in challenging stereotypes will be asserted.

2. Postcolonial Novel as Counter-Discourse

Modern Western colonialism can be traced back to the 15th century, the 'Age of Discovery'. However, the European colonial and imperial expansion can be divided into three broad waves. The first wave was focused on the Americas, the North and the South, and the Caribbean. The second was focused on Asia, while the third extended European control into Africa (Gallagher et al. 115). In short, the era from the 15th century to the mid-20th century identified the European colonial period. At that time, several European powers established colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Americas that ended with the national liberation movements of the 1960s. Historically, as Cornelius Castoriadis points out, in this period of "new imperialism, more than eighty five percent of the globe was under western domination," concluding that, "the earth has been unified by means of western violence" (200).

It has been argued that when describing colonialism, three characteristics can regularly emerge: domination, cultural imposition, and exploitation. Ronald Horvath defines colonialism as "a form of domination – the control by individuals or groups over the territory and/or behavior of other individuals or groups" (47). Influenced by their colonial tendencies and attitudes, as Ricky Lee Allen admittedly states, Europeans are not able to achieve the status of "civilized beings" because their history was in reality "not a narrative about the evolution of civilization but rather a myth that masks our perpetual state of savagery and dehumanization vis-à-vis direct and indirect forms of genocide and institutional violence" (479, qtd. in Gohar 139). Here, it is noteworthy to point out that colonial hegemony over the colonized is achieved not only by military domination but also through the process of writing history from the viewpoint of the colonizer; and this has had a tremendous impact upon the colonized nations even after independence. Thus, as a policy for establishing and propagating such a hegemonic discourse and political domination over the colonized people and as a result of a belief in the racial and/or cultural superiority of the colonizing power, colonizers have invented and perpetuated different kinds of stereotypes some of which still exist till today.

According to the influential work, *The Empire Writes Back* (2002) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, post-colonial literature can be said to "cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the

moment of colonization to the present day” (2). As the Europeans, with the power of colonization, established their superiority over other people by the process of ‘othering’ and ‘distorting’ the realities especially in their writings, postcolonial writers, such as Aidoo and others, have gained the opportunity to counter the colonial portrayal of colonized people in general and of their own people in particular. They engage in ‘writing back’ with a view to fight prejudice, discrimination and stereotypes done purposefully by the white Eurocentric people against others as expressed in many of the Western works of art, media and literature. According to Childs, “Achebe has recommended English as a language in which the writer can speak to the world” (305) Thus, Aidoo here uses English to subvert colonial discourse and unveil the reality of colonialism and its effects on her people. She has explicitly showed a concern to correct the misrepresentations of the African/Ghanaian culture and history.

In fact, several studies have been done on Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*, but some of them were focused on the empowerment of African woman by examining the concerns of feminism in Ghanaian fiction as reflected in the novel. Other studies were focused on the life of African self-exiles in Europe, as we can see in Wilentz's paper, "The Politics of Exile: Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*" (1991). In Cheryl Sterling's paper entitled, "Can You Really See through a Squint? Theoretical Underpinnings in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*" (2010), the novel is read as a reversal of the colonial travel narrative presenting the continued asymmetrical power relations between Europe and Africa. However, in the present study further analysis of the novel from a postcolonial point of view is done in order to clarify and assert the role of the postcolonial novel, as counter-discourse, in challenging colonial stereotypes. What Cheryl Sterling and other critics fail to recognize concerning stereotypes is further explained in detail in the present study with a view to provide a comprehensive critical analysis of the discursive strategies Aidoo uses to subvert the colonial discourse by challenging the common stereotypes of African women and the Africans' adulation of Europeans.

3. Ama Ata Aidoo as a Postcolonial Writer:

Ama Ata Aidoo is an African novelist, poet, playwright, short story writer, and children's writer. She was born in 1942 to Chief Yaw Fama of the

Fanti town of Abeadzi Kyiakor, Ghana, and his wife, Maame Abba Abasema. At the time of Aidoo's birth, Ghana was under the oppression of a resurgent neocolonialism which remarkably affected her writings. Later, Aidoo, both as a writer and as a scholar, has played an important role in the development of African literature and literary criticism. Aidoo started to write and publish poetry when she was a student at the university. She worked with "Efua Sutherland, founder of the Ghana Drama Studio" ("Ama Ata Aidoo (1942-)"). Her major works include two plays, *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965) and *Anowa* (1970), a short-story collection, *No Sweetness Here* (1970), two novels, *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977) and *Changes* (1991), and a volume of poetry, *Someone Talking to Sometime* (1985)" (Hoeller 32). Her later titles include *The Eagle and the Chickens* (1986), a collection of children's stories, *Birds and Other Poems* (1987), *An Angry Letter in January and Other Poems* (1992), *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories* (1997), and *Diplomatic Pounds and Other Stories* (2012). It is Aidoo's most famous and prominent novel, *Changes: A Love Story* (1991) which brought international acclaim for her, winning her the Commonwealth Writers Prize Africa Division ("*Changes: A Love Story*").

In fact, Aidoo's works include various genres: fiction, drama, poetry, essays, letters and criticism. In her writings, Aidoo was influenced by the historical events which have shaped her life and her country. She focuses more on "the legacy of the slave trade, the impact of neo-colonialism on the Educated Ghanaian elite, and the notion of exile and African diasporic identity" ("Ama Ata Aidoo (1942-)"). She speaks about the legacy of colonialism and depicts the many diverse confusions and problems her African characters face in post-colonial Africa. Moreover, Aidoo has played an important role in the struggle for the Ghanaian national liberation and self-determination in the context of colonialism and neo-colonialism. She has also criticized the corruption and hypocrisy of the national bourgeois in post-independence Ghana (Behrent). According to Hoeller, Aidoo's entire work focuses on the colonial and postcolonial experience of Ghanaians in particular and Africans in general, as she put it herself in an interview: "It's beautiful to have independence, but it's what has happened to our minds that is to me the most frightening thing about the colonial experience" (McGeorge 26, qtd. in Hoeller 33).

In her novel *Our Sister Killjoy*, Aidoo writes about the negative effects of colonialism and exposes the psychological effects of colonialism and "what Europe is and does to those Africans whom it "sponsors" and educates" (Gagiano). Aidoo criticizes those Africans who left Africa to go to Europe to receive what is perceived by the majority to be a better education. She reveals how most of those educated people are molded into being like the Europeans by internalizing the ideologies of the colonizer.

In short, Aidoo's postcolonial African fiction is Janus-faced in nature. On the one hand, it specifically deconstructs various indigenous issues which are destabilizing Ghanaian society and politics, while on the other hand it challenges the discursive construction of Ghana, its people, history and culture as primitive and uncivilized through colonial discourse.

4. Colonial Discourse and the Misrepresentation of Africa(ns): Stereotypes in

Our Sister Killjoy

4.1 *Our Sister Killjoy*: Beyond Travel Narrative

Our Sister Killjoy by Ama Ata Aidoo was first published in 1977. It is also entitled *Reflections from a Black-eyed Squint*. When the book was first published, most reviews were highly positive and the work was called a witty and experimental. The novel was written partially in the United States which may reflect Aidoo's own travels abroad (Wilentz 159). The novel discusses many themes including 'Black Diaspora', 'Colonialism', 'Racism', 'Exile', 'Identity Crisis', 'Colonial Education', and 'Colonization of the Mind'. This novel can be seen as "a working out of her rage against the white oppressors and their Ghanaian abettors." (Banerjee)

The semi-autobiographical novel, *Our Sister Killjoy* or *Reflections from a Black-eyed Squint*, exposes the psychological effects of colonialism upon the colonized people, showing how a country, although gained its independence, suffers as if it were still under colonization. In the novel, Ghana is presented as imprisoned by discriminative education, Western ideology domination and brain drain that seem to disturb its progress (Demafiles). In other words, Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* makes it clear that it is not easy for a colony to completely break with the restraining influences of the colonizers. In his dissertation, *Crossing Borders and the Search for an African Selfhood: A Postcolonial Study of Aye Kwei Armah's Why Are*

You so Blest? And Ama Ata Aidoo's Our Sister Killjoy, Aissaoui Mustafa asserts this fact:

After a long struggle, African nation-states eventually gained their independence but the ramifications of colonialism were so profound that these nations are still suffering from its effects: geopolitical fractures, cultural confusion, and serious identity crisis. (2)

In fact, the colonial history of Ghana has seen the establishment of an educational system that was modeled after Western ideologies. Students who performed well were often encouraged to continue their education in the colonial country. In *Our Sister Killjoy*, Aidoo presents the reality behind the scholarships given to fortunate African people. She explains how those people who internalize Western ideologies refuse to return home to face national realities and rebuild their countries. This is one of the major problems that most developing countries, including our Arab countries, have been suffering from till today. "Although Aidoo experienced the supposed freedom of traveling herself, her novel implies her commitment to rebuild her former colonized home and confront those who have forgotten their duty to their native land" (Wilentz 159).

Aidoo's title of the novel, *Our Sister Killjoy - Or Reflections From A Black-Eyed Squint*, symbolically reflects a new African encounter with the West. It explores the thoughts and experiences of Sissie, a young Ghanaian woman who travels to Europe on a scholarship. In her journey, Sissie travels from Ghana to Germany and England and then returns to Ghana. In the novel, everything is seen through the squinted eyes of the modern, educated young woman, Sissie, who starts to realize that "England is another thing" (OSK 85).

The title implies that Aidoo, through her mouthpiece, Sissie, does not have any intention of adoring the European colonizers and their culture. On the one hand, Sissie is a "killjoy" who spoils the fun of the European self-esteemed colonizers who try to impress her with the European civilization and its openness to difference. She kills the joy of her German friend, Marija, as she indifferently rejects Marija's odd sexual advances, reflecting upon the miserable life of European women who are suffering from loneliness and self-alienation. On the other hand, Sissie is a killjoy to the African self-exiles who are self-deceptively infatuated with European

culture and forget their own homelands. Unlike those Africans, she remains true to her home and never loses sight of her role and duty towards her homeland. As a matter-of-fact and practical woman, Sissie is never fascinated with the European culture and civilization. Rather she spends all her meetings with the African self-exiles discussing the political situation of Africa. She irritatingly reminds them of how they value the colonizer's world more than their own and how they come back home only to complain and exploit rather than build their own nations. They prefer to lie and pretend to be happy rather than confronting the hard truths of reality. Hence, she kills their superficial joy by exposing the reality of their pretended happiness in Europe and by highlighting their sufferings and the miserable conditions in which they live. Even her letter to her lover, who has decided to remain in exile, is more political in nature than romantic. Sissie here is seen as a killjoy as she asks her lover and others in exile to come out of their delusions and forces them to acknowledge their duties towards their motherland. Thus, they consider her too serious and a killjoy. As she puts it herself:

They say that any female in my position would have thrown away everything to be with you, and remain with you: first her opinions, and then her own plans...what did I rather do but daily and loudly criticize you and your friends for wanting to stay forever in alien places?...Maybe I regret that I could not shut up and meekly look up to you... but you see, no one ever taught me such meekness. (117)

At the level of form, the novel is written in a very unique and innovative style which made Aidoo's narration more powerful. It is a mixture of prose, poetry and letter writing. Therefore, it cannot be called a "novel" in the traditional sense. *Our Sister Killjoy* is divided into four sections. The first short section is titled *Into a Bad Dream* where Sissie travels to Germany. It prepares the reader for a journey to the land of the colonizers. The second long section is titled *The Plums* where Sissie befriends Marija Sommer, a German lady whose husband is never home. The third section is entitled *From Our Sister Killjoy* where Sissie arrives at London which brings back to her mind the British colonial experience in Ghana. In London, she meets the Ghanaian self-exile, Kunle, and discovers how Black African immigrants are suffering. The last section is titled *A Love*

Letter which seems like a dialogue between a man and a woman. In this section, Sissie recounts her meetings with the African self-exiles especially Kunle, her lover, asking them to come out of their delusions and return back to contribute to the development of their homeland.

4.2 Colonial Stereotypes and their Impact on the Colonized

Gordon Allport has defined a stereotype as “an exaggerated belief associated with a category, its function is to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to that category” (191). In the same way, Lori Peek defines a stereotype as a “preconceived idea that attributes certain traits, behaviors, tastes, or other characteristics to a group of people” (43). To stereotype is a way to categorize “other individuals as members of groups and assume that the perceived characteristics of those groups, the stereotypes, characterize those individuals” (Sides and Gross 584 & 589).

In *Our Sister Killjoy*, Aidoo alludes to the problems that face the Ghanaian students who have left their country in order to study in Europe. She highlights the difficulties and hardships they face as a strategy to expose stereotypes and their effects. From the very beginning of the novel, Aidoo shows how stereotyping leads to racism and discrimination. At the plane, a white hostess asked Sissie to go to the back of the plane in order to join other black African students. It was her first encounter with racism and discrimination. The narrator comments:

Immediately after they were airborne and instructions had come for them to loosen their belts and feel free to smoke, a neatly coiffure hostess of the airline walked to her. She said, 'You want to join your two friends at the back, yes?' (10)

As mentioned earlier, European colonizers purposefully create stereotypes as a means to justify colonialism and assert their superiority. In this novel, Aidoo has powerfully emphasized this critical point. Conspicuously, she illustrates how the European colonizers have consciously used racial difference as an excuse to occupy more lands and have hegemony over the colonized nations under the guise of civilizing missions. When Sissie reached Germany, she becomes conscious of the color of her complexion for the first time. Her first encounter with the Germans reminds us of Frantz Fanon's reminiscences of the little boy on a train from Paris who shouted “Look, a Negro” a few times, and then finally, “Mama, see the

Negro! I'm frightened" (*Black Skin* 112). At the station, Sissie was puzzled when she realized that there was a woman who was telling her daughter "Black girl? Black girl?" (*OSK* 12) The narrator further comments:

But what she also came to know was that someone somewhere would always see in any kind of difference, an excuse to be mean.

A way to get land, land, more land. (13)

It is that difference in color which makes the European colonizer feels superior to the Black Other. It is the White Europeans' insistence to consciously look at the Other as essentially 'different' which creates their sense of egocentrism, self-pride and hence the exclusion of the Other. According to Fanon, the colonialist does not only view the new world as one of difference, but as the opposite of all that is human and civil and "paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil":

The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare to admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil. (*Wretched* 32)

According to Peek, stereotypes may or may not emerge from some kernel of truth, but they always involve widely held overgeneralizations that do not take individual difference into account (43). Here, Aidoo's novel shows how the colonized or the non-Europeans are always othered by the colonizers and collectively treated as exotic objects. At their first meeting, Marija thought that Sissie was an Indian because she had previously befriended two Indians. Marija views Sissie through a racialist lens, asking her, "Are you an Indian?" (*OSK* 19) Blinded by her stereotypical preconceptions, the white, Marija, tends to generalize the view and assumes that Sissie is an Indian just because of her coffee color skin, neglecting the fact that vast differences of language, culture, and history distinguish one "black" group from another.

Stereotyping the Black African as dangerous, immoral, and dark is clearly illustrated in the novel. When Marija befriended Sissie, German people started to wonder and consider that there must be something wrong in their relationship. They cannot see or accept this relationship as something normal.

Why does she always walk with the black girl? asked the director of
of
the local branch of a bank.

Sommer does not speak English and the African speaks no
German.

So who interprets for them? asked a manager of a supermarket.

What could they be talking about? wondered an insurance broker.
She must not take her to her house every day!

She must be getting neurotic!

It is perverse. (OSK 44)

Aidoo has also proved how the Western people deal with the
colonized based on the stereotypical images they have already constituted
about them. The preconceived established image of the Black African as a
clown whose job is just to entertain the White Europeans is clearly described
through Kunle words:

You know how in the western hemisphere, they still want to
believe that the only thing Black people can do is to entertain
them? Run, jump and sing? Of course, we Africans have never
really succumbed to their image of the Nigger ... (129)

Throughout the text, Aidoo shows how most Africans glorify
Europe and Western ideologies to such a degree that makes them measure
success in life by traveling to Europe and experiencing the Western life
“somehow, going to Europe was altogether more like a dress rehearsal for a
journey to paradise” (9). This demonstrates how colonialism and its
missionaries have affected the culture of the colonized nations by installing
and generalizing stereotypes of them. Consequently, this resulted in creating
somehow an inferiority complex in the part of the colonized nations. In other
words, colonialism along with colonial education has influenced the
language and culture of the Ghanaians and helped in normalizing the
colonial discourse among the natives. Accordingly, the black Africans in
Europe suffer from identity crisis in their attempt to imitate Western culture.
This is clear when Sissie explains to Marija the reason behind calling her
‘Mary’ in Ghana. She argues that Mary is an English name which her
parents gave her when they baptized her. She says that in Ghana people used
to call her Mary merely because it is “good for school work and being a
lady” (24).

In fact, inferiority complex, which subsequently leads to identity crisis, is one of the most crucial effects of stereotyping. In the novel, African students feel inferior and start to imitate the West as a strategy to gain respect in the society. As a result of being caught between two cultures, they suffer from self-alienation. The dreadful condition of Kunle, Sissie's lover, and his fellows is a good example. Kunle feels inferior and declares that by remaining in Europe, he serves a very useful purpose in educating the Europeans to recognize his worth (129).

In fact, stereotyping leads a person to pre-judge others and develop certain preconceptions about them before even knowing them. In this regard, Lippmann relevantly remarks that:

We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And those preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception. (90)

This act of blind prejudgment is considered as a kind of oppression. In the novel, Aidoo refers to this point when Sissie recalls her meeting with an Indian:

ONCE UPON THE TIME, she said,
In Gottingen or thereabouts
I too had met an Indian
My feelings were nebulous
Not liking or liking
Only hearing some other
Friend from some other place:
'We are the victims of our history and our
Present. They place too many obstacles in the
Way of love. And we cannot enjoy even our
Differences in peace' (OSK 29)

In the above extract, Aidoo clarifies how colonialism and colonial history have distorted people's perception of the Other. History written by the more powerful serves imperial needs and carries many false assumptions. Aidoo in her counter discourse attempts to humanize the White Europeans, emphasizes equality and asserts that human differences of color or culture do not necessarily represent the real character of the individual. She indicates that every person has a unique character and one cannot judge others merely

based on the stereotypes invented throughout the course of history. She declares that such stereotypes always hinder possibilities of understanding others as they are, stand as an obstacle on the way of love and lead people to suspicion, distrust and, hence, exclusion, if not demonizing and violence.

5. Deconstructing the Imperial Narrative: Reversing Binaries and Challenging Stereotypes in *Our Sister Killjoy*

As explained earlier, colonial discourse along with colonial representations have created and perpetuated stereotypes about the colonized people throughout the course of history. Africans, especially the Black, have been depicted as savages, illiterate, lazy, uncivilized, having animal desires, immoral, dark, or evil. Such internalized stereotypes still exist till today and affect the Africans especially those who live abroad. In his article, "Why Africans worry about how Africa is portrayed in Western media", Remi Adekoya points out:

But Africans, especially those living abroad, fret about the perception of their continent and its inhabitants because their future often depends on the opinions of those in whose country they reside. For instance, I know British passport holders in the UK who keep secret their Nigerian roots at work because of the negative perceptions created by the country's notorious e-scammers. Also, many African professionals in Europe I have spoken to get exhausted by constantly being underestimated in their workplaces because it is assumed that since they grew up and went to school in a poor, backward environment (as many presume all of Africa is), they can't know terribly much after all. (Adekoya)

In his dissertation, "*Colonial Representation in Robinson Crusoe, Heart of Darkness and A Passage to India*", Nourin Binte Saeed concludes that:

Colonial representation means "political presentation" of a particular group in the sense of making a portrait. And this process occurred especially in the case of binary power relationships through the representation of the West and the East, Self and Others. The image of the Orient as "Other" produces racial conflict and makes the Western culture and identity more

powerful and superior. And to analyze this binary process of representation demarcates “us” versus “them” – an awareness of representation of the non-European as exotic or immoral “Other”. So, colonial representation shows “how truth is constructed” and creates false ideologies. (5)

In her article “Colonialist Pretexts and Rites of Reply,” Helen Tiffin argues that the reversal of otherness and colonial stereotypes is an essential strategy towards postcolonial recovery, and this is exactly what Aidoo attempts to achieve in *Our Sister Killjoy*. It is one of the postcolonial novels that turn the ideas of colonialism, ‘Othering’ and racism on their heads. Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, advocates a discursive strategy which aims to provide a new reading of Western canonical texts by integrating a counter-discourse dynamics able to uncover colonial implications hidden in these texts. This new hermeneutics of interpretation is called “contrapuntality” (93). By applying Said’s strategy of ‘contrapuntal reading’ on a Western canonical text, we can provide evidence that writing can never be a neutral activity, to use the words of Gohar (148). As an embodiment of ‘writing back’ in postcolonial literature, *Our Sister Killjoy* can be seen as a parody for Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899). In *Our Sister Killjoy*, the protagonist travels from the colonized land to the colonizers’ country in order to reverse the colonial travel narrative and challenge the distorted image of Africa and its people. Thus, Aidoo as a postcolonial writer undertakes an opposite journey to unveil the reality of the perceived representations of Africans which have been propagated and circulated among Westerners. In this regard, Cheryl Sterling comments that:

Scholars such as Anuradha Dingwaney Needham and Bryon Caminero-Santangelo argue that *Our Sister Killjoy* renders an oppositional voyage, as a young, African female journeys to Europe to encounter the savage, white Other. (134)

In *Our Sister Killjoy*, Aidoo takes the language that was used to subjugate her nation and uses it to challenge the stereotypes which were internalized on colonized people, especially African woman. Through the character of Sissie and her journey, Aidoo reverses the Western stereotypical discourse and its racial prejudices. She deconstructs the traditional established binary “Self” and the “Other”. The “Self” which used to indicate the white, Western, colonizer in colonial literature is reversed. In his essay,

“Ama Ata Aidoo’s Black-eyed Squint and the ‘Voyage in’ Experience: Dis(re)orienting Blackness and Subverting the Colonial Tale”, Lhoussain Simour supports this conclusion:

Over the course of the author’s-inspired travel narrative, Sissie, the protagonist travels to Europe as a student and moves across the boundaries of a racially and culturally different space. It is through this movement that the reader becomes aware that Sissie is not the Other for the western imagination; but Europeans, particularly Germans, are “the other for her firmly centered, African Self.” [20] The position of Sissie’s “subjective centrality affirms the particular perspective of her black-eyed squint against the claims of the universal” [21] which consider the West as “the great family of man.”[22] So, there is already a self-conscious counter discourse that the narrative articulates in order to metaphorically penetrate this great family of man and reverse the whole western discourse on Otherness. (1453)

Thus, the preconceived images of the colonized are resisted, twisted and subverted. In the novel, Sissie is the observer which is similar to that privileged position of the Western traveler. Due to the power of her position, Sissie is given the right to evaluate things. For example, we can see how Simour has analyzed Sissie’s evaluation of the German landscape as the follows:

Looking at the river, Sissie sees history’s manifestation in its most vicious and wild ramifications. She sees a past of the West’s historical abuse and its colonial brutal rape: “Looking at the river / how many / virgins had / Our sovereign lord and Master / unvirgined on their nuptial nights.”[25] Reading beyond and against the brochure describing the German countryside and its glorious castles, Sissie’s black-eyed squint realizes that it’s not only virgin lands that were raped in the name of expansion and domination, but she sees in Germany’s river the primitive history of patriarchal, feudal exploitation, distressing rape, pain and anguish. The whole Europe becomes immediately a heart of violence, savagery, ignorance and lust. (1454)

In fact, this idea of the Black Africans' civility in contrast with the White European savagery is reinforced by Ricky Allen's Western self-perception as he unequivocally admits that:

... we whites, as a people, have yet to move from savagery to civilization. Our notion of civilization is part of a dream state that keeps us unconscious of and complacent within our necrophilic desires. Meanwhile, we project our true selves into others (479, qtd. in Gohar 139).

Not only does Aidoo deconstruct the binary opposition of 'Self' vs. 'Other', but also reverses the binary of 'Superior' vs. 'Inferior.' In the novel, Sissie is a self-centered and empowered female character who does not play a passive role. She rejects the seduction of Marija avoiding being used as an object of desire. Sissie's resistance to Marija's sensual advances indicates her refusal to be molded into what Marija wants her to be. This asserts her position as a strong and self-determined female character that cannot be dominated. By this, Sissie proves that she is not inferior to Marija, which implies a shift in the Western hierarchy of power.

As one does from a bad dream, impulsively, Sissie shook herself free. With too much effort, unnecessarily, so that she unintentionally hit Marija on the right cheek with the back of her right hand. (*OSK* 64)

On the other hand, Sissie's relationship with Marija deconstructs the predominant image of the colonized as a sensual or lascivious character. Although Sissie feels sorry for the condition of Marija, she does not accept her odd sexual orientation. She feels ashamed of telling anyone about Marija. This implies how weird and shameful in Africa to have a relationship of this sort and asserts their respect for social values and morals. Sissie wonders in confusion:

... do you go back to your village in Africa and say... what do you say even from the beginning of your story that you met a married woman? No, it would not be easy to talk of this white woman to just anyone at home... (65)

In addition, Aidoo in this novel deconstructs the myth of Western white beauty and challenges the stereotype of black ugliness. Through several examples in the novel, Aidoo asserts Sissie's superiority over her European Other. In her first encounter with color difference, Sissie describes

the white skin color of the Germans as something disgusting and wants to vomit. The narrator describes Sissie's wondering as the following:

And it hit her. That all that crowd of people going and coming in all sorts of directions had the colour of the pickled pig parts that used to come from foreign places to the markets at home. (12)

However, she regrets dehumanizing the Other and feels ashamed of being racist. By this, Aidoo highlights the elevated and civilized manners of the colonized African and challenges the stereotype of black savagery. Unlike the Westerners who used to underestimate their Black Other, Sissie's African moral superiority prevents her of being tempted to racism. Sissie recognizes difference in color, but to her that does not essentially entail inferiority or superiority of race. The narrator says:

She looks and looked at so many of such skins together.

And she wanted to vomit.

Then she was ashamed of her reaction.

Something pulled inside her.

For the rest of her life, she was to regret this moment when she was made to notice differences in human colouring. (12-13)

Moreover, in the process of humanizing the White European masters, Sissie goes on to criticize their food and ways of eating. The narrator comments:

Sissie would always puzzle over it. Cold food. Even after she had taught her tongue to accept them, she could never really understand why people ate cold food. To eat ordinary cooked food that has gone cold without bothering to heat it is unpleasant enough. But to actually chill food in order to eat it was totally beyond her understanding. In the end, she decided it had something to do with white skins, corn silk hair and very cold weather. (OSK 68)

In fact, Aidoo in this novel purposely endows her main character, Sissie, with a sense of self-pride as opposed to the shameful and disgraceful attitude of the White colonizers. This helps her in shaking the fixity of the Eurocentric sense of privilege and in reversing the order of superior-inferior binary system. Sissie's pride of being black is clear when she disgustingly describes Marija's white skin. Sissie feels grateful of being black and pities those who have a white skin. The narrator explains Sissie's astonishment as follows:

But oh, her skin. It seemed as if according to the motion of her emotions Marija's skin kept switching on and switching off like a two-colour neon sign. So that switching her against the light of the dying summer sun, Sissie could not help thinking that it must be a pretty dangerous matter, being white. It made you awfully exposed, rendered you terribly vulnerable. Like being born without your skin or something, 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)

In addition, Sissie's sense of superiority is reinforced by her level of education and her capability to speak English fluently. Thus, Aidoo subverts the colonial stereotype which views the colonized as illiterate who cannot speak English well. Unlike Marija, Sissie is well educated and her English is excellent. This is clear through the many conversations presented between Sissie and Marija in which Marija's English appears illogical and silly. Therefore, Sissie, who is not supposed to speak correct English, can speak the language better than the Whites do. A good example of this point is clear when Marija lists what she has for dinner; she used the word 'flesh' instead of 'meat'(38).The fact that Marija admires Sissie and regrets not being educated affirms Sissie's superior position. The narrator says:

Marija's eyes were red. She was saying that since she had met Sissie, she had been wishing she was better educated to go places ... Not just like any tourist. Sissie says she was sorry. Not wanting pity, Marija smiled, saying it was good to have Little Adolf who would go to university, travel and come back to tell her about his journeys. (60)

Aidoo has also deconstructed the colonial myth of the benevolent Centre, Europe. Throughout the novel, the imperial location is depicted to symbolize the heart of darkness. In the last section of the novel "A Love Letter", Sissie admits that naturally cold countries are no places for anyone to be by themselves. She argues:

There is a kind of loneliness overseas which is truly bad. It comes with the cold wind blowing outside the window making the trees moan so. It is there in the artificial heat in the room which dried my skin and filled my sleep with nightmares. (119)

Aidoo unveils the reality of Europe by using the subversive eyes of Sissie who displays the actual situation of being overseas:

Otherwise the story is as old as empires. Oppressed multitudes from the provinces rush to the imperial seat because that is where they know all salvation comes from. But as other imperial subjects in other times and other places have discovered, for the slave, there is nothing at the centre but worse slavery. (88)

Thus, in Europe there is nothing for the colonized except subjugation. Aidoo makes it clear that the West has nothing to offer for the ex-colonized except more oppression. The perceived stereotype that views the West as the source of wealth and lavish life is clearly subverted by the description of the African's real condition in Europe:

Above all what hurts our sister as she stood on the pavements of London and watched her people was how badly dressed they were. They were all poorly clothed. (88)

Sissie wonders why her people leave their warm houses to stay in cold places. The narrator explains:

Then she became very angry. At whatever drives our people to leave their warm homes to stay for long periods, and sometimes even permanently, in such chilly places, winter in. winter out. (89)

In another section of the novel, Sissie laments her people using these words:

Beautiful Black Bodies

Changed into elephant-grey corpses,
Littered all over the western world,
Thrown across railway tracks for
Midnight expresses to mangle
Just a little bit more-
Offered to cold flowing water
Buried in thickets and snow (62)

Moreover, such a stereotype is challenged and undermined, when Sissie requests all immigrants to return home. When Sissie reaches London and witnesses the miserable condition of her people, she wonders why they are still abroad and why they did not tell the truth when writing to their families or when they come back home:

So when they eventually went back home as 'been-tos', the ghosts of the humans that they used to be, spoke of the wonders of being overseas, pretending their tongues craved for tasteless foods which they would have vomited to eat where they were prepared best. (90)

In fact, through the relationship of Sissie and Marija, Aidoo points to the empty life the European woman has to lead. She highlights the crisis in human relationship showing how the family life between husbands and wives is full of ignorance and abandonment. Husbands leave their wives for days or maybe months thinking that by doing so they guarantee better life for them. However, this results in a shattered family with loveless, deadly dull and unsettled life. In fact, Sissie blames colonialism and its strategies of making the wives feel loneliness (65). The narrator describes Sissie's reaction towards Marija's loneliness as the following:

As the room began to spin around her, Sissie knew that she had to stop herself from crying. Why weep for them? In fact, stronger in her was the desire to ask somebody why the entire world has had to pay so much and is still paying so much for some folks' unhappiness. (66)

Aidoo has also reversed the binary of rational vs. irrational, through the relationship of Sissie and Marija. Most of the time, Sissie is rational and criticizes Marija's irrationality. Unlike Sissie, Marija glorifies Sissie and considers her as her savior. Her emotion towards Sissie is over laden. This is evident when the camp leader was about to prevent Sissie of going home with Marija because it was so late. The narrator explains:

Outside, Marija heaved a sigh of relief declaring that she would not have been able to bear it if they had prevented Sissie from accompanying her home.

As for *Our Sister*, she didn't comment on that. What she was thinking was that the situation did not call for such panic. For as far as she was concerned, she could have gone back to her companions, after fixing an earlier date for the next day. (46)

According to Fanon, the black man is despised, since "He has no culture, no civilization, no long historical past" (*Black Skin* 34). In a similar context, Fatima Rony argues that under colonialism, colonized people were deemed "ethnographic: of an earlier time, without history, without archives" (194).

As the humanity of the colonized native is rendered suspect, individualized subjectivity is denied and negative stereotypes are invented. Such colonial stereotypes have constructed colonized people as inferiors who do not have culture, civilization, or history until Europeans have come and installed them in the colonized societies. Here, Aidoo confronts this stereotype, when an Afro-American student asks an American professor whether Egypt is in Africa and whether the Egyptians who built the pyramids, the professor's reply was evidence to how the African civilization is deeply rooted in history:

'My dear young man,' said the visiting professor,' to give you the decent answer your anxiety demands, I would have to tell you a detailed history of African continent. And to do that, I shall have to speak every day, twenty-four hours a day, for at least three thousand years. (OSK 111)

Another point of Aidoo's critical way in reversing colonial discourse is when naming Marija's husband and son the same name. This indicates Aidoo's indifference towards the Europeans. She considers them as a homogeneous mass.

Who is Big Adolf?

What does he look like?

Big Adolf, the father of Little Adolf,

Naturally. (64)

Throughout Aidoo's novel, the conventional Eurocentric notion of Western culture and history as the most advanced, rich and tolerant is rewritten and thereby challenged. As Tiffin argues that the historically hegemonic Eurocentric notions of what European culture and history is, and what other cultures and their histories are, is something that is being questioned and rewritten by post-colonial literature ("Post-Colonial Literatures" 96).

6. Concluding Remarks:

To conclude, Aidoo is one of the postcolonial writers who 'write back' to colonialism and colonial literature. She has used her writings as a tool to present her country's problems and difficulties during colonial time and after independence. In *Our Sister Killjoy*, Aidoo has succeeded in reversing the perceived stereotypical image of the African colonized. In

other words, she has reversed, altered and deconstructed the Western binary system.

Throughout the novel, Aidoo keeps on alluding to the effects of colonialism that engulfs her people. She has efficiently used Sissie as an embodiment of the African woman who fights against colonial ideologies. Beyond the preconceived image of the African woman, Sissie is strong, proud, confident, and well educated. Aidoo presents her protagonist, Sissie, in a way that challenges the stereotype of the colonized African as the inferior helpless Other and the white man as the savior. The myth of Europe as the best place is deconstructed, as well. Europe is shown as a lifeless place which is characterized by emptiness and is devoid of any real pleasure or happiness. It has nothing to offer the ex-colonized people except for more soreness and subjugation.

In fact, in today's world of globalization and multiculturalism, there is a genuine need for a reconciling discourse that transcends cultural difference, religious conflicts, racial prejudice and discrimination. Accordingly, this study has attempted to highlight and assert the role of the postcolonial novel, as counter-discourse, in challenging stereotypes throughout history with a view to eliminate their negative effects on people as such colonial attitudes generally result in sustaining prejudice, hatred and obstruct any possibilities for dialogue and peace in the world. Therefore, this paper recommends that literature writing and its interpretation should cease to be a 'battle ground' for orchestrating and illuminating the binary opposition between the Self and the Other. Rather, canonical and non-canonical texts should be written and read in such a way that promotes racial and gender harmony, equality, dialogue among cultures and global peace.

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