

The Politics of Exile: Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*

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The term "politics of exile" calls to mind those sufferers who must leave their homeland for political reasons. But there is another aspect of the politics associated with exile—that of the so-called third world colonial who seeks the benefits and opportunities in a European country, perceived as culturally superior, thus avoiding the socio-political situation at home. Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy or Reflections from a Black-Eyed Squint* (1979) is a relentless attack on the notions of exile as relief from the societal constraints of national development and freedom to live in a cultural environment suitable for creativity. In this work, Aidoo questions certain prescribed theories of exile including the reasons for exile—particularly among African men. The novel exposes a rarely heard viewpoint in literature in English—that of the African woman exile; Aidoo's protagonist Sissie, as the "eye" of her people, is a sojourner in the "civilized" world of the colonizers. *Our Sister Killjoy*, which reflects Aidoo's own travels abroad, was written partially in the United States. Moreover, although it was published in 1979, first editions carry a 1966 copyright, closer to the time in which she was traveling. Although Aidoo experienced the supposed freedom of exile herself, her personalized prose-poem-novel illustrates her commitment to rebuild her former colonized home and confront those who have forgotten their duty to their native land.

Most critical reactions to the novel have ranged, predictably, from negative responses to silence and non-recognition.¹ What has disturbed Aidoo most is not the negative criticism but the "unreception" of the novel—the refusal of many African critics to discuss it at all. In a speech, "Unwelcome Pals and Decorative Slaves," Aidoo refers to the attitude of her male colleagues towards her involvement in political issues, expressed at a meeting on national development:

"[Some professors] shouted that I am not fit to speak on public matters. That I should leave politics and such to those [men] most qualified to handle it" (23). Later in this speech, she comments: "I am convinced that if *Killjoy* or anything like it had been written by a man, as we say in these parts, no one would have been able to sleep a wink these couple of years" (38). Clearly, the fact that Aidoo is a woman has made this novel unacceptable to the predominantly male and/or eurocentric critical community, but because she rejects male-oriented theories of exile and synthesizes feminist and afrocentric perspectives, *Our Sister Killjoy* could hardly have been written by a man. Here I examine Aidoo's challenge to prevailing theories of exile, her questioning of the supposed superiority of European culture for the colonial subject, and her exposé of the politics of exile for African self-exile. Through a combination of prose, poetry, oral voicing and letter writing Aidoo's Sissie reports back to her home community what she sees in the land of the colonizers and responds to those exiles who have chosen, as Frantz Fanon says, to stand with the white world (perceived as the "real world") in opposition to their own world, the black world of the colonized (37).

A discussion of some relevant theories of exile may be of use here. Although I am not going to explore the distinction between exile and expatriation, I do exclude from this discussion those who were forced to leave as banishment (on penalty of prison or possibly death); rather, I focus on those who seek exile for personal and/or cultural reasons. Many of the theories concerning these self-exiles (as I call them) entertain the notion that the exile chooses to escape limitations at home. Whether seeking freedom from the small town in the metropolis or from the colonial province in the colonizer's capital, the exile, particularly the exiled writer, sees himself—and I use this term advisedly—as freed from the constraints at home and open to a world of cultural expression and diversity (Gurr 13–17). In *Exiles and Emigrés*, Terry Eagleton clearly confirms this view in relation to the writers Henry James and Joseph Conrad: "James and Conrad chose England [for] its order, its manners, its settled, varied and traditionalist status. . . . [They] settled in England in flight from a lack of established order and civilized manners elsewhere" (14). For the white American James, as for other colonials, there exists the cultural inferiority of the colony, and they are forced to go into exile "as a means of compensating for that sense of cultural subservience" (Gurr 8). For colonial exiles of the non-industrialized "third world," both

the difference of color and the lack of so-called development augment these feelings of cultural inferiority. The Caribbean writer George Lamming suggests that for colonial exiles, especially those living in the "country which has colonized [their] history," the exiles' sense of culture is intricately related to the self-interpretation of the dominant culture. In fact, for those educated in the colonial language, "their whole introduction to something called culture, all of it, in the form of words, came from outside" (27). Although generally stated, most theories of exile and its political implications are based on male experience and are therefore male-oriented in approach. This male-oriented approach ignores women sojourners like Sissie, who are not fooled by the neo-colonial lie, but see the land of exile as it is. In giving voice to Sissie's viewpoint, Aidoo not only overturns the assumptions of cultural superiority that the self-exiles bring with them in expatriation; she also exposes the sham behind the self-exile's reason for leaving from a polemically female perspective. The African men Sissie meets fit these theories of colonial exile, but Sissie does not. She is the "squint" who, rather than being isolated from her home, becomes the eye of her community in the land of the exiles.

Sissie's reflections open with a section, "Into a Bad Dream," which prepares us for her shamanistic journey to the land of the colonizers. Before we are even introduced to our squint, Aidoo deconstructs the structure of the novel by opening it with a four-page poem/political statement, an attack on the world into which Sissie will descend:

Yes, my brother
 The worst of them
 these days supply local
 statistics for those population studies, and
 toy with
 genocidal formulations.
 That's where the latest crumbs
 are being thrown! (7)

In fact, it is hard to call this compilation of poetic anger, political commentary, journal entries, oral voicings and letter writings a "novel" in the traditional sense. Rather, it appears to be a formulation of an African prose poem which reverberates with sounds of the orature in the written language and personal dialogue—illustrating Aidoo's

comment that “we don’t always have to write for readers, we can write for listeners” (Lautré 24). Furthermore, Aidoo’s breakdown of the novelistic structure exemplifies one aspect of exile that Lamming suggests affects most writers from colonized lands—the problem of writing in the colonial language. For the anglophone African author, writing in English, “home is in a different language. It is a double exile, in culture and in the tongue” the author feels compelled to use (Gurr 28). In wrestling with this conflict, Aidoo manages to inject the colonial language with the substance and structure of her own Akan. Linguistically, she challenges the sense of double exile that comes with the colonial experience.

“Our Sister” does not choose exile but is picked as a promising student and is given a scholarship to attend an international work-study program in Germany and to visit her colonial “capital”—London. As in a bad dream, Sissie boards a plane to Germany. In a mixture of prose and poetry, Sissie reports her feelings of being seen as an “exotic” by the people of Germany, her experiences with an unhappy German housewife, and her questions concerning the cultural superiority of Europe and its corresponding cruelty. Then, in journal entry form, she recounts her encounter with the colonial power that changed the history of her Ghanaian home—England. While in London, she faces Ghanaian and other African self-exiles, confronts them for deserting their homelands, and in a final “love letter” she berates a lover who has decided to remain in exile as she returns home.

Aidoo comments that her protagonist Sissie sees everything “through the filter of her memories of Africa” (Vincent 2). Moreover, as “Our Sister,” Sissie is rooted in her African communal society and all her responses are oriented toward decolonization and the education of this community. Unlike other exiles who have lost that sense of identity that comes from belonging to a community, Sissie becomes the eyes of her community, reporting on those lost ones who have forgotten maternal, familial and community ties, and squinting at these men—young and old—who refuse to return home to face national realities and rebuild their countries. It is no mistake that Sissie is female; she is the representative of all the mothers and sisters and daughters who have been left behind on this illusive search for artistic, political, cultural and perhaps even sexual freedom.

In the statement on Conrad and James quoted above, Terry

Eagleton focuses on their belief that culture and order existed only in Western Europe, most specifically in England, and by going there one could be freed from the lack of civilization elsewhere—most often, in the colonies. Sissie rejects these notions of civilization in her scathing attack on Western culture and in what she sees and contemplates in Germany. Critic Anita Kern, in a fairly negative review of *Our Sister Killjoy*, comments that Aidoo “seems to ‘have it out for the west’ ” (57), but clearly Sissie’s angry language and shocked thoughts reflect a young woman who has expected to find a cultural paradise yet sees something far different. Sissie’s first encounter with the Germans on the street reminds me of Frantz Fanon’s remembrances 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” (111–12). For Sissie, response to her blackness is not as extreme, but certainly as disconcerting:

Suddenly, she realized a woman was telling a young girl who must have been her daughter: ‘Ja, das Schwartzte Mädchen’ . . . [sic] And it hit her. That all the crowd of people going and coming in all sorts of directions had the colour of pickled pig parts. . . . (*Killjoy* 12)

Visibly, through her own crude description, Sissie is striking back at the Europeans who see her skin as unnatural, and she is later ashamed of her mocking words; but it is also evident that being black and female makes her an oddity for the Germans who are fascinated by this show-piece, this “African Miss” (43).

Ironically, the one person who sees beyond Sissie’s blackness is Marija, the unhappy housewife, and through their friendship Sissie is exposed to what she sees not as cultural superiority, but as an example of the West’s societal degeneration—the breakdown of the family. Marija, who befriends Sissie, lives in a cold, stone house with her son and a husband who never comes home. And lest we miss the point, both father and son are named “Adolf”—albeit a common German name, but certainly a loaded one. Sissie feels compassion as well as affection for this lonely, frail woman, yet at the same time, she is suspicious, uncomfortable, and angry at their mutual historicity. In her thought poems, Sissie spills out these feelings “Who was Marija Sommer?”:

A daughter of mankind's
Self-appointed most royal line,
The House of Aryan—

An heiress to some
Legacy that would make you
Bow
Down
Your head in
Shame and
Cry. (48)

This section of the novel called “The Plums”—a European delicacy not available in Ghana—reflects Sissie’s, and perhaps Aidoo’s, conflicting feelings for the women of this dominant culture. On one hand, they are intricately connected to the values and privileges of this society, retaining many of the culture’s prejudices towards the “other”—male or female—yet, on the other hand, they are also victims of this society. For Sissie, her comprehension of the emptiness of this isolated woman’s life is exacerbated by Marija’s attempt to reach out for her sexually. And, although this section may be problematic for some feminist scholars, it is evident that Aidoo—however sympathetically—sees this attempt at a lesbian relationship as a perversion of womanlove and part of the degeneration of European family life:

Sissie thought of home. To the time when she was a child in the village. . . . Oo, to be wrapped up in mother’s cloth while it rained. Every time it rained.

And now where was she? How did she get there . . . where now a young Aryan housewife kisses a young black woman with such desperation, right in the middle of her own nuptial chamber. . . . (64)

Through Sissie’s perceptions, we witness this sexual affection arising from the despair of a western-style, isolated, loveless family life. However, it is also clear that Marija is seen as a fellow sufferer, and her home situation is one that many women deal with in some way or another throughout the world. For Sissie sees Marija’s weeping not only as personal loneliness but also as part of a larger political

discourse—the “collective loss” (67) that women within the context of an aggressive patriarchy must endure. Moreover, as she watches older “Bavarian ladies” in black dresses walking through town, she envisions them as war widows, “The blood of their young men was / Needed to mix the concrete for / Building the walls of / The Third Reich” (36).

If our squint Sissie sees the plight of the German woman sympathetically for the most part, she has very little compassion for German culture as a whole. She sees the notion of Aryan superiority as symptomatic of Europe’s mandate to colonize and oppress, and she connects the attempted genocide of the Jews to the murder of oppressed people everywhere. When Marija tells Sissie she must see Munich, Sissie thinks in her poetic/polemical voice that Munich is the home of the “Original Adolf” and then her thoughts jump from images of “freshly widowed Yiddisher Mamas” to the Rhodesian concentration camp-like system of apartheid after the country’s 1965 so-called independence (81). The workings of Sissie’s mind on the colonizer and the colonized filter through her experiences in this supposed paradise for the exile; her thoughts strike back while her words remain polite. The division between the polite exchange student and the angry woman inside is revealed in Sissie’s meeting with the German-born American professor. He tells her that the one thing Germans and Africans have in common is that they have both been oppressed. Amazed, she is unable to respond:

Yes, so frozen was her mind with this icy brilliance of this master discovery, she could not ask him whether after the Germans, the Irish and Africans—indisputably in that order—there are or could have been some other oppressed people on the earth, like Afro-Americans or Amerindians or Jews. (93)²

But she also realizes that “the world is not filled with folks who shared our sister’s black-eyed squint at things” (93).

If our black-eyed squint mentally reprimands the colonizers because of their history of domination, she looks equally askance at the African self-exiles who have bought the colonial line. In Germany, our sojourner reacts to the various Europeans she meets and plays off her memories of home against this alien environment. But it is her trip to England that conjures up a personal response to colonialism and compels her to issue a direct attack on her countrymen who have

considered it politically expedient to remain in exile. She comments in the opening of this diary-like section "From Our Sister Killjoy": "If anyone had told her that she would want to pass through England because it was her colonial home, she would have laughed. . . . But to London she had gone anyway" (85). This section, compiled like so many journal entries, is a report to family and community (those mothers left behind) on the state of the self-exiles who have not only forgotten to return to help with the process of decolonization, but who forget even to answer the letters pleading to learn of their health and whereabouts.

For the African self-exiles in England, Our Sister really is a killjoy. She confronts the life she sees there, not the one which has been paraded before the folks back home. For many exiles, "the desire to lose oneself in the [European] world was understandable: a naive faith that this is the way to escape the feeling of exile" (Dorsinville 63). But Sissie does not become caught up in the exiles' dream; she sees the life they lead with clarity. Her piercing look exposes the lies that have been sent back to the provinces. Her amazement at finding so many black people in London is painfully accentuated by her acknowledgment of their poverty:

Above all, what hurt Our Sister as she . . . watched her people was how badly dressed they were. They were all poorly clothed. The women especially were pitiful. She saw women who at home would have been dignified matrons as well as young, attractive girls. . . . She wondered why they never told the truth of their travels at home. (88-89)

Although Sissie focuses on the women when she looks at the poor people in the street, she centers on the men when she explores the psychological poverty of those who feel there is nothing left for them in the colonial provinces, that life in London is where all "culture" begins.

In *Black Skins, White Masks*, Fanon explains the delusion of cultural superiority that the exile in the colonial "mother country" suffers from: "The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle" (18). As I have mentioned earlier, many of the theories of exile focus on a sort of freedom felt by separating oneself from the constraints of the home country; this feeling of freedom is linked with a distorted sense

of importance for the colonial exile. Furthermore, for the third world exile, as Fanon points out, this freedom also involves a rejection of both racial and cultural identification. Again, although this example may extend to women self-exiles, Fanon appears to be using the term "he" not as gender inclusive, but as a specific aspect of the psychological disturbances of these male self-exiles. Aidoo underscores this point in her discussion of a Ghanaian self-exile, Kunle, who believes that the problems of apartheid will be solved by Western technology. He illustrates his point by citing the fact that a "good Christian" white South African doctor used the heart of a young black man for a transplant to keep an old white man alive. When confronted by the confused Sissie and her friend on which hearts were used in earlier attempts at transplants, he answers eagerly, "He must have experimented on the hearts of dogs and cats" (97). Kunle, caught up in his identification with the dominant culture's "advances," has no comprehension of the irony of his own comments. For Sissie, Kunle not only represents the self-exile who values the colonizers' world more than his own, he also represents the "been-to" who comes home with an exile's consciousness to complain and exploit rather than help build the nation. His identification with the culture of his exile makes him unable to confront the political realities at home. Although he returns to his native land, as Aimé Césaire calls it, he is not willing to sacrifice and utilize his skills to improve conditions. Instead:

Kunle, like so many of us, wished he had had the courage to be coward enough to stay forever in England. Though life 'home' has its compensations. The aura of having been overseas at all. Belonging to the elite, whatever that is. The sweet pain of getting a fairly big income which can never half support one's own style of living. . . . (107)

Kunle's death, his chauffeur-driven car "burnt to its original skeleton," illustrates the wastefulness of the African elite, both materially and spiritually. But Kunle's attitude also clarifies, for Sissie, the reasons why many others are "coward enough" to remain in England.

Some of the early novels of Africans in exile (Peter Abraham's *A Wreath for Udomo* comes to mind) examine the conflicting feelings even the forced exiles faced in terms of their life in England versus what they had to confront at home. For the self-exiles who can return,

remaining in Europe represents another political decision—to deny the needs of their homeland and ignore the hardships faced by those left at home. *Our Sister Killjoy* forces us to look not only at what happens to those who are cowardly enough to remain isolated from their community, but what happens to the mothers and other family members who await their return. Perhaps it is because more men have experienced exile—unhampered by children and often chosen by community leaders—that Aidoo focuses on them as examples, but with the exception of Sissie's comments about the poverty of the women's clothes, Aidoo does not critique the role of the African women exiled overseas. Sissie, although a student-exile herself, is clearly attached to her homeland, especially the women who are waiting for some word from their errant men. As she remembers these women left behind, Sissie's thought-poems construct the mostly unanswered letters from home, asking the sons Kofi, Bragou, Obi and others when they are coming home. The letters—"for which we died expecting and / Which / Buried us when they came"—underscore the financial and emotional hardship the families face when most of their resources have gone into the training of the "One Scholar." However, the letters also emphasize the love and confusion of these women who have lost their children to false dreams of the dominant culture's ideology:

There is nothing bad here
. . . except our family is
drowning in debts. . . .

Now,
it is me,
Your Own Mother
speaking.

There is nothing bad here

And I am not complaining
My Child.
You also know
we are proud
that
you are Overseas. (104–05)

The pathos of these letters interspersed with the insensitivity of the exiles themselves illustrates the socio-political effects of the exile experience on those at home. Moreover, the letters critique those feelings of freedom and notions of cultural superiority for the self-exiles who have forgotten their duty to their emerging nations.

In the final section of this prose-poem-novel, Aidoo jumps from the snatches of letters cited above to what Chimalum Nwankwo has rightly called a “confrontational” love letter. Sissie writes this letter to her lover who has decided to remain in exile. Although I am unable to agree that this love letter necessarily indicates “communication between man and woman” as “a way out of this morass” as Nwankwo suggests (58), we can see that Sissie clearly speaks her mind. The irony of this section’s title is that Sissie’s epistle ends up more a political statement than a traditional love letter. To her lover and the other African self-exiles, Sissie is the killjoy who refuses to allow them to live in their delusions and forces them to acknowledge the duties they have ignored towards their native land and families. “A Love Letter” is less angry than the earlier sections of this work. Rather, it is filled with remorse for a relationship that cannot last and for a world that has profoundly lost its way. She softens her language in writing to this lover, yet the use of colonial language as her medium exiles her from her deepest speech: “[How can I] give voice to my soul and still have her heard? Since so far, I have only been able to use a language that enslaved me, and therefore, the messengers of my mind always come shackled?” (112). Sissie’s resistance to the language she writes in mirrors the concerns of many writing in the colonial language—a “language which sought to deny” them.³ Moreover, the realization that Sissie cannot speak to her lover in anything but the colonial language, distancing her from him, is exacerbated by the fact that he does not see this as a problem. What he considers a problem is that she is too aggressive, too outspoken, “too serious” (112). This love letter is composed of her polemical voicings—possibly rearguing points with this unseen lover. She compels him to address the problems colonial rule has left these countries with and the frightening loss of perspective and lack of leadership at home. At the same time, the letter is full of her wishing that she could stop confronting him, that he would hold her once again. For Sissie, her desire for this man comes in direct opposition to her strength as an African woman as she states:

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. But . . . 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)

In a further incorporation of the dominant culture's values, the self-exiled men demand what Sissie calls "hashed-up Victorian notions" for their women, in spite of the fact that they should understand that African women were not brought up to be like the "dolls of the colonizers" (117). In her other works, Aidoo has concentrated on the strength of the African woman as well as the domination—both male and colonial—over her. In *Killjoy*, she confronts the colonized male's notion of the ideal African woman (all softness and meekness) when these men have forgotten the real African women at home.

In this love letter, Sissie recounts her most direct confrontation with the African self-exiles. Sissie speaks out at an African student union meeting. They spend hours discussing the political situation in the home countries but do not see the denial of their services as part of the problem. Tired of the "beautiful radical analyses of the situation at home," Sissie asks these exiles why they just don't hurry back and do something about it (121). She examines each of their reasons for exile and calls them excuses. Her greatest distress, however, is directed at a doctor who stays in exile because he feels that his sophisticated medical skills would be wasted in his country. Rather than dealing with the reality that many doctors are needed in Africa, he is proud that he can remain to educate the Europeans to "recognize our worth" (129). This, of course, is what Fanon indicates as the final stage of internal colonization—to isolate oneself from one's own society and identify totally with the colonizer. Only in this world are one's skills valuable; the self-exile "congratulates himself" on the fact that "his race no longer understands him" or appreciates his skills (Fanon 14). To Sissie, this "brilliant" doctor becomes the symbol of everything "distasteful about all the folks who have decided to stay overseas" (126). He and others like him, who consider their only duty to the country is to send some money home to their mothers, deny a deeper commitment to their family and land of their birth; they squander their

talents on the colonizers, who would rather see them “run, jump and sing” (129).

In the final line of Sissie's love letter, she recalls what her lover asked her when they met: “I know everyone calls you Sissie, but what is your name?” (131). We, as readers, do not find out her name (nor the name of her lover), but as *Our Sister* she is the messenger of the people, her kin, to the land of exiles. For Sissie, “the tale is not done being told” and, as the eyes of her community, she will return home to tell this tale to the mothers and other family members (121). Here is where the self-exiles are most nakedly exposed: they are afraid to go home. Sissie's tale, as a sister, is for the community as a whole but especially for the African mother who, as both the self-exiles and Sissie agree, has suffered. But she cannot be appeased—nor can “Mother Africa”—by a paltry sum. She needs to see her children face-to-face, bringing their skills for national development that she “scrimped and saved and mortgaged her dignity for” back home (123). Sissie ends her letter as her plane starts to descend to the West African coast. She decides not to send it. Writing it was all that was necessary—and later telling the tale to those at home: “Besides, she was back in Africa. And that felt like fresh wild honey on the tongue: a mixture of complete sweetness and smoky roughage. Below was home with its unavoidable warmth and even after all these thousands of years, its uncertainties” (133). Although Sissie's lover does not learn from her experience, those who read her thoughts do. This collective novel of political thought, poems and personal perceptions ends on a positive note; happy to be back from her shamanistic journey, Sissie is ready to tell her tale, dispel the myth, and go to work for her nation.

In an interview, Nigerian critic Theo Vincent questions Aidoo's use of an African woman as the protagonist of *Killjoy*, one as politically astute as *Our Sister*. Aidoo responds: “But will this kind of vision be part of any African man's awareness of Europe? . . . What makes you think that our men are more politically aware than our women?” (3). Certainly, in this novel, it is the protagonist's social vision that differs from her male counterpart's; she discerns exactly what the politics of self-exile is. And like her protagonist, Aidoo saw through the false paradise of the exile during her stays in the United States and Europe, and she has remained, for the most part, in Ghana to be part of its national development. As an African woman writer, Aidoo questions the freedom of the exile who denies both familial and

community ties; furthermore, she—as well as other African women writers such as Flora Nwapa, Efua Sutherland, 'Zulu Sofola, and Aminata Sow Fall—is committed to her homeland, in spite of the “uncertainties” that exist there, because of her ties to the land and its people. Aidoo and other women writers like her feel bonded to their larger national communities, as they do to their extended families. In *Killjoy*, she presents an African woman who does not flee the constraints imposed on her by her society, but instead takes the responsibility to be the “eyes” of her community and exposes the world of the self-exiles who have forsaken their familial land.

Notes

1. Critics like Vincent and Kern, cited in this article, discount the importance of this work because of its attack on both the exile and the land of exile; it is unfortunate that there have been few critical studies done on this important work. For a more positive, albeit cursory review, see John Ngara: 65–66.
2. In her first play, *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965) and her collection of short stories, *No Sweetness Here* (1970), Aidoo explores the relation of the Afro-American to Africa and Africans. In her second play, *Anowa* (1970), Aidoo examines African complicity in the slave trade.
3. This phrase is taken from the introduction to an unpublished manuscript by the Trinidadian poet, Marlene Nourbese Phillip, *She Tried her Tongue, Her Silence Breaks Slowly* (1988). See also, George Lamming, “A Monster, a Child, a Slave,” in *The Pleasures of Exile*: 95–117.

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