*Our Sister Killjoy*: A Highly Writeable Text

*Our Sister Killjoy* is an avant-garde novel that pushes the boundaries of what fiction can be. It is not a text made for easy answers and reader satisfaction. This novel appears to be much more ‘writeable’ than ‘readable’, as described by Catherine Belsey in *Critical Practice*: a text open to multiplicity, one in which the reader must actively engage with the work in order to comprehend it, one that doesn’t produce answers and yet insists upon questions. Therefore, it is prudent to examine *Our Sister* Killjoy using post-Saussurean modes of reading. Post-Saussurean linguistics present the concept that language itself lacks inherent meaning – it cannot exist in a vacuum. Words only mean things in relation to other words, and language as a whole needs a social environment to become meaningful. This idea lends itself well to a novel like *Our Sister Killjoy*, which embraces the lack of inherent meaning in language, and utilizes this multiplicity to parallel its similarly complex thematic ideas. Two post-Saussurean methods of reading are deconstruction, which focuses on the instability of meaning in a text, and ideology critique, which is concerned with the repercussions of these meanings in the work’s sociopolitical context. Both of these methods can be used to examine the form and structure of *Our Sister Killjoy.*

In terms of deconstruction, this novel uses language in a variety of ways to make readers question what’s put before them. For instance, the novel opens with a single phrase on an otherwise blank page: “Things are working out” (Aidoo 3). This phrase continues onto the next page: “towards their dazzling conclusions…” before continuing into a more complete poem on the following page (Aidoo 4). This opening immediately provokes an abundance of questions in the reader: What things are working out? For whom? What are the ‘dazzling conclusions’ referenced? If they are conclusions, why are they mentioned at the novel’s *start*? The answers seem to lie in what is *not* stated – the blank spaces on the page. This idea very much plays into the deconstructionist idea that language is unstable, with meaning not fixed. Readers must be open to the hunt for answers that are not stated, answers that lie hidden in the blankness of the page. This blankness also appears to have other implications, which I will discuss shortly.

Another example of the way form is used to show the instability of language and its meaning is in the way that the novel itself appears to be ‘coming apart,’ collapsing from structured prose into poetry. This union of prose and verse is jarring for readers likely used to more structured fiction. The moments when prose collapses into verse are also often charged with ideological discourse, perhaps suggesting the way society is collapsing at the seams. For instance, the first section of the novel, “Into a Bad Dream,” moves from prose to prose poetry and finally true poetry as Sissie is first “made to notice differences in human coloring” upon her arrival in Germany (Aidoo 13). This segment reflects the inadequacy of traditional literary form in capturing such major societal issues as *Our Sister Killjoy* tackles. Additionally, even in such a harsh moment of realization as this, Sissie doesn't express much personality or confide emotional truths to readers. She instead serves as a vessel for the author’s sociopolitical ideas. This distance from the novel’s protagonist puts the emphasis on language and all its potential meanings, rather than characterization. This segment concludes with the lines: “Power, Child, Power. / For this is all anything is about. / Power to decide / Who is to live, / Who is to die…” before going onto the next three pages with the singular words “Where,” “When,” and “How” (Aidoo 13-16). This section is again employing the power of the blank page while addressing quite significant ideas about human relationships. The blank space also seem to shroud such ideas as what post-colonial society should ideally look like, and what perspectives are missing in constructing this. This entire segment leaves conclusions and interpretations up to the reader, especially as the novel here transitions into its next section, “The Plums.” This segment is an example of how the novel’s form lends itself to interpretation through a deconstructionist lens.

Ideology critique can be used to analyze the novel’s opening as well. What is particularly interesting about this novel is that it is remarkably self-aware of its own ideology, and thus manages to provide critique within the text itself. The continuation of the aforementioned opening poem demonstrates this, reading: “… so it is neither here nor there / what tickie-tackies we have / saddled and surrounded ourselves with, / blocked our views, / cluttered our brains” (Aidoo 5). These ‘tickie-tackies’ could be viewed as the ideologies that readers come in with, the pre-existing perceptions of post-colonial Europe and Africa – and the choice of the word ‘tickie-tackies,’ which has connotations of triviality and foolishness, makes readers question how sound these ideologies actually are. In this description, Aidoo foregrounds the incoherence of generally accepted post-colonial ideology, preparing readers for the ensuing critique that the rest of the novel undergoes. From here, the novel continues to be abstract, offering vignettes and meditations on the problems of post-colonial society rather than a true unfolding of plot, tying its internal ideology critique into the deconstructionist nature of its form, as referenced above.

Ideology critique also appears in the novel’s second section, “The Plums.” This section of the novel is the most coherent in terms of plot, but still interrupts its own prose storyline with verses insights about the events and conversations surrounding Sissie. It is unclear whether these thoughts are coming directly from Sissie herself or from another unnamed narrator, but what is certain is that this Aidoo’s way of using structure to incorporate her internal ideology critique. For example, when Sissie walks through the town square with her German friend Marija, there is a poem reflecting the absurdity that has brought them both to this time and place: “And Our Sister? / A Little / Black / Woman who / If things were what they should have been, / And time had not a way of / Making nonsense of Man’s / Dreams, would / Not / Have been / There / Walking / Where the / Führer’s feet had trod…” (Aidoo 48). By separating this statement out into verse, Aidoo makes more stark this commentary from the preceding prose. She utilizes form to convey the absurdity of Sissie’s presence in Germany, a country that now welcomes young Africans to study abroad there, but not all that long ago participated in the massacre of people who, like Sissie, were different from the perceived European ideal. This example shows how Aidoo uses her novel’s form to provide her own critique of the ideology of the post-colonial world.

Another instance in which the novel presents its own ideology critique is in the final section, “A Love Letter.” In her letter to her mysterious love, Sissie states: “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?” (Aidoo 112). Through this line, Aidoo presents within the text the question of the reliability of the novel’s main tool of form: language itself. If Sissie is writing in the language of the colonizers, the language of the imperialists both she and her ancestors have spent so long trying to break free of, then does Sissie really have control over the language she speaks, or is the language speaking Sissie? Is she confined by the communicative system presented to her? Sissie herself is the one questioning this – and using her language, English, to do so. This segment represents both the ideological and deconstructionist critiques contained within the novel itself.

The examples above give just a small taste of the radical nature and complexity of *Our Sister Killjoy* in comparison to typical modern novels. This novel’s form represents a more abstract, ‘writeable’ novel that lends itself much better to reading methods such as deconstruction and ideology critique than traditional reading practices. In fact, as well as being amenable to these post-Saussurean methods of critique, the novel itself presents internal critiques of conventional literary form, post-colonial culture, and the impact of language on both. Overall, *Our Sister Killjoy* seems to present a new kind of novel, a novel that defies established structures and forms, to discuss questions that don’t have apparent answers, and forge the literature of a changing age.