



A Socio - Analytical Study of Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike*

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Abstract

Mour Ndiaye, the Director of the Department of Public Health and Hygiene, has to clean the streets of beggars to give room for economic buoyancy through tourism, in Dakar, the capital on the directive of the President. The presence of these beggars in streets constitutes hindrance to economic growth. But for the progress, peace and long life of members of the society, beggars are indispensable. For Mour Ndiaye to be promoted to the post of Vice-President of the capital, beggars are so indispensable across the streets. Beggars refused to go back to streets from the slum being barred to after suffering humiliations and brutalization from the government agencies. This paper x-rays issues in cultural contact and its effects the on day to day administration by government policies, the African superstition and the hypocrisy in the society. Textual analysis method is used to critically explore reasons for almsgiving, the sincerity and the disingenuousness in this act. The foreign perception of the physically challenged ones in the society should not be imitated entirely in the African context as every situation is culturally catered for. The study concludes that African problems are better solved with African values and traditions.

Keywords: Socio – analytical; Aminata Sow Fall; *The Beggars' Strike*; *Marabouts*; *Alms*.

1. Introduction

.....They need to give alms because they need our prayers – wishes for long life, for prosperity, for pilgrimages; they like to hear them every morning to drive away their bad dreams of the night before, and to maintain their hopes that things will be better tomorrow. You think that people give out of the goodness of their hearts? Not at all. They give out of an instinct for self – preservation.....
p 22.

The novel, *The Beggars' Strike* is set in Africa, though the name of the country is giving simply as the Capital, and we want to assume from that nationality of the author of the novel is Africa specifically, Senegal. The novel is a post-independence text; hence, it reveals the events in Africa after independence. The idea of pursuing the beggars away from the streets is to make the Capital, (that is, the place of setting of the novel) tourists' friendly, which could be symbolic. Not only this it serves as a segregation trait which is common to African writings as an attempt to reveal the true picture of events. In the novels of Eza Boto (1954), *Ville Cruelle*, Mongo Béti (1974), *Le vieux nègre et la médaille*, Sembene Ousmane (1957), *O pays mon beau peuple!* among several other African literary writings, the image of cultural contact is perceived. According to Bestman (1980), *L'urbanisation accentuait donc les humiliations des africains*. Urbanization is the root of humiliation of Africans. Exit of the colonial masters left behind the political and social demarcation in the countries of Africa. The idea of reserving certain part of the town to some privileged ones could be what stands to depict the beggars in this novel. As blacks should not be seen in the white reserved areas, so also beggars should not be seen on the streets to attract white people from Europe and the United States of America. In *Remember Ruben*, Mongo Béti pictures the African socio-political situation, the major places, the clubs, and parks are exclusively reserved for whites. Blacks should not be seen in areas that are for the whites without any concrete mission.

To make the capital tourist friendly, the authorities have this in mind,

...nowadays people who live a long way away, in Europe and the United States of America, white people especially, are beginning to take an interest in the beauty of our country.....when these tourists visit the city, they are accosted by the beggars and we run the risk of their never coming back here or putting out unfavourable propaganda to discourage others who might like to come
p.18

Giving alms is common among all human beings; it is not limited to Africa alone, for social and religious reasons. It is the fourth pillar of Islam which is also viewed as charity by some. Muslims who should as a matter of religious obligation give to the needy. This aspect is so important and must be fulfilled. It is a socio-contract between those who have; the rich and those who do not, the pitiable. This is giving for the sake of Allah, one's money, time, efforts or in consideration for the benefit of others who lack such. These people hold the belief that the reward will be given by God, (Allah) himself. Since those at the receiving end, the poor, possess no means to compensate the rich ones, the compensation will be in multiples for givers by God. This promise serves as a morale booster for the rich Muslims. Sagar, one of the characters in the novel also comments on this when discussing with Keba on how beggars would live if they don't beg? Who would people give alms to, as they have to give alms to someone, according to their religion? This shows how indispensable these people are in the society. Men are of the view that

when they give alms to the needy, it prevents evils from befalling them, and it assists them to develop and progress. In a bid to boost economic life, whites are needed. This accounts for different guiding principles that encourage regular contact with these two different worlds, though termed as tourism. For the outsiders to be interested in visiting the capital, the beggars must be kept away from the public. They should not be visible to the outsiders. They are to be relocated to another place of about 200 kilometers away. They now live in the new slum clearance resettlement area. This new area could be likened to segregation that existed during the colonial era. The privileged black discriminate against their black counterparts due to their medical condition. The basic necessity of good living was not provided, the road not tarred, no pipe-borne water, no traffic light as in the city. This is a facsimile of the isolation between the white place of abode and that of the black during the colonial period. People with disabilities are to live in an area not easy to get by foreigners. [Ilesanmi \(2004\)](#) makes us realize that authors create events and characters according to their intentions, visualize them and attribute to them all the roles they play in the literary work. This implies that the story as narrated by Sow Fall is just an imaginary work but reveals what is obtainable in post-independence African societies. Many of the policies by the political head of each nation are just at the facial value the cultural inference is not considered. This is detrimental to the society at large in all ramifications.

2. Theoretical Framework

The novel could be seen from a sociological perspective as it deals with social structure. Sociology is viewed as a social science based on the study of human behaviour and the application of that knowledge for the betterment of social welfare. [William and Addison \(1960\)](#) perceive the sociological novel which centers its principal attention on the nature, function, and effect of the society in which the characters live and on the social forces playing on them, vis-à-vis the society in which they live. We therefore wish to apply the sociological framework to the analysis of this paper, as the author, Aminata Sow Fall presents a society that accommodates people of different strata, the reaction and counter action of these people to government policies. Policies are made by the apex body of government. The civil servants, bureaucrats are to effect all the policies of the government. They should make sure that these policies are realized. The policy to get rid of beggars in the streets is by the government. The public health department is to carry this out to the letter with all other agents of the government. This social problem is what the novelist tries to present. In this novel, Fall makes us to realize that many government policies do not give consideration to many citizens in such a society. The able bodied cannot survive without the aid of these people called handicapped. Everybody is indispensable in any given society. The handicapped also need the assistance of these able bodied to live. The authorities consider these beggars as obstacle to the hygiene of the city, and their presence hinders the economic progress of the society. Therefore, they must be cleared off the streets, to boost the image of the capital and to make it a tourist attraction to foreigners.

The idea of giving alms to these beggars is neither out of the love of these people, nor out of generosity, but rather to fulfill the religious obligations, or the prescription by the marabouts. When the rich ones in the society have any issue, or they have bad dream, looking for promotion or to drive away any bad smell, they contact spiritualists called marabouts. They hold much belief in these marabouts and are eager to do anything prescribed by these marabouts to solve the problem. The marabouts instruct these well-meaning ones in the society to give certain things to beggars in order to attain higher positions. It may also be an avenue to ward off evils or calamities that may befall them. Nguirane, one of the beggars when commenting on the alms they receive from the able bodied said that they whisper to alms before they are tendered to beggars. This shows that there is usually one or many reasons for giving alms. Despite this, the policy of the government is that these beggars should be relocated to new places which are far from the capital. Among the reasons for the distance is to debar or discourage these people from returning to their earlier places of begging. The director of the department of public health and hygiene, Mour Ndiaye, carries out the directive to clear beggars off the streets weekly with full force. One of the raids leads to the untimely death of Madiebe, a lame beggar. He was forced to run to an oncoming vehicle in an attempt to avoid the law of the capital. This lame man, Madiebe, left behind, two wives and eight children. Another notable raid is the one that led to the untimely death of a comic beggar, P. Diop, this man in the capital was loved by all. Everybody likes to give him alms, if not for his physical handicap for his talent as a humorist. Beggars could no longer allow themselves to be sent to untimely grave, to avoid harassments, imprisonments, physical abuse and unnecessary embarrassments they decided to reserve themselves to the place cleared for them. The rich with their wealth now visit these beggars in their area. They could not survive despite their arguments against the presence of the beggars on the streets. This novel shows a kind of hypocrisy and violence in the echelon of society.

3. Sociological Implications of the Literary Work

Sociology has been viewed in the upper part of this paper, we shall try to look at its perspective as regards the novel. The idea of welcoming the white men to African societies remains an indisputable fact. Among the reasons for embarking on tourism is to have knowledge of other cultures and natural events. It could be a source of income as those visitors would engage in commercial activities in one way or the other. This is what many African leaders perceive as a way to increase their internally generated revenue. To achieve this, many policies by policy makers, are to the detriment of the citizens. This is one of the major explanations in the novel. The beggars are to be gotten rid off in the main streets of the town. This is just to give room for strangers. The physical deformities and constant presence of beggars is considered as a factor to scare tourists away from the capital which is considered as having a negative impact on the economy. Government bureaucrats are so insensitive to the plight of the common man. Beggars are considered as good-for-nothing constituent in society. This makes the Department of Public Health and

Hygiene, with its force to take draconian measures to get rid of Dakar's steer from its beggars in order to support the president.

In a typical African context, beggars are very important and cannot be substituted. African traditions give room to these people and places some emphasis on them. The novel describes the beggars as an integral part of the society's social alignment, and their subtraction from such any society creates profound disruptions in people's everyday lives. Sow Fall, through the novel reveals some important functions of beggars in the African context. The message clears the mind of many youths and some foreigners who believe that such a practice should not be allowed to thrive and suggested for its total abolition. It is also a point to be noted that every element in each society has a function and cannot be brushed aside. The society looks incomplete without them. African culture or society cannot exist peacefully and progressively without the beggars. For those at the helm of affairs to succeed, alms need be given to beggars. Sacrifices are to be offered to the destitute in the society. Their presence constitutes obvious factors in each African gathering. The culture and tradition of Africans attach importance to these destitute in the society and they play a vital role. Society cannot advance without these people. Evolution of an individual is that of the society. Beggars are as necessary to the citizens of the capital as the air we breathe in African setting. The oracles demand for sacrifices, which must be given to beggars as the oracles or the ancestors are invisible. It is a believed fact in Africa that these destitute represent several deities which hold and control the destiny of the people in the society.

Beggars were driven from the city to a slum, which is about 200 kilometers away. This is to make them invisible to the visitors, (the Whites). The natives consult their marabouts frequently when they need peace, progress, long life or when they want to ward off bad omen from befalling them.

.... they whispered their dearest and most secret desires to the alms they tender: I make you this offering so that God may grant me long life, prosperity and happiness.....may the Almighty drive away all my cares as well as those of my family, protect me from Satan, from man-eating sorcerers and all the spells that might be cast upon me.... That is what they say when they drop a coin or a little gift in the palm of your stretched hand... our hunger doesn't worry them, they need to give in order to survive, and if we didn't exist, who would they give to? they need us so that they can live in peace! P 37-38.

Many Africans are so hypocritical; they all realize the importance of these people but refuse to give any consideration to their existence in the society. They drove these people away to reserved areas. The beggars unwillingly accept to be confined to the given new area. Later their presence is required by the able bodied to make progress and for their illness to be cured. Sacrifice is to be given to these beggars in different parts of the Capital, the beggars refuse to come to the street again. For the director in charge of health that drove beggars away from the streets, Mour Ndiaye to become the vice president, sacrifices for beggars in strategic places in the street are required. His marabout instructed the sacrifice of a white goat which should be slaughtered and distributed to beggars in different parts of the town for the vision to be achieved. Now that beggars are no more on the streets, he looked for beggars and travelled to their new place. He pleaded with beggars but they refused and made jest of him. Beggars refused to be back on the streets for alms. They revolted against their inhuman treatment. For Mour Ndiaye to be vice president looks impossible as the beggars are not on the streets any longer. This is not limited to Mour Ndiaye alone, many others visit the new location with different articles as alms. They do not consider the distance or the bad road. Those that drove them away still troop to the new location, very far and not as good for habitation. The purpose of their visit was for their prayers to be answered.

4. Islamic Perspective on Begging

The religion of Islam is designed to guarantee the establishment of a noble and virtuous society where all will live well. The religion encourages helping others. It discourages begging as a profession. It views begging as an act that eliminates a person's honour and self-esteem. It commands and persuades working and views it as a high virtue. It forbids and disapproves laziness and begging. It also orders and encourages Muslims to give food to the poor and to oblige the one who asks for something. However, begging, which impairs human honour and virtue, shatters personality and leads to exploitation of benevolent people's pure feeling. The prophet of the religion said a lot on the act of begging, in one of his sayings in (Zakat, 103) he is quoted thus, "*some among you do not ever abandon begging. Finally, on the Day of Resurrection, that dishonorable person will meet Allah with no flesh left on his face*". Despite the fact that Islam encourages the rich to give to the needy, it discourages people from begging. It is also said in the novel that *religion prescribes help for the poor, but it doesn't tell the poor to cause continuous disturbance to their neighbours*. P 15. Islam encourages the ruler to be conversant about the elderly who haven't enough to eat and also the infirm. The policy should be to make life bearable to all citizens, as these people should be catered for, and for the infirm to enjoy life as citizens because their infirmities are not by their own making.

5. The Africans and Their Spiritual Beliefs

Culture exists all over human societies from East to West and from North to South. Culture varies from one area or society to other. When defining culture, Thomas Menampampil (1996:9) as quoted by Ilesanmi (2004) says "*Culture is the total manner in which a human society responds to an environment. It includes customs characterizing a social group; social heredity of a particular community; meanings, values, norms, their actions and relationships; beliefs, laws, traditions and institutions: religions, ritual, language, song dance feast, living habits, crafts, equipment*". This could be summarized as the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings which is transmitted from one generation to another. This shows that societies will have different world perceptions

and values. In the novel, the author exposes how Africans live and resolve their everyday's problems in conformity with their beliefs and norms. Africans resolve their personal problems in consulting occultists who give directives on the step to be taken. This may not be accepted by other cultures who also have their own different approaches to issues. Despite that the society is a muslim dominated one, they keep consulting fortune-tellers, marabouts, whenever they sense problem or looking for favour. The marabouts, or fortune -tellers prescribe different forms of alms and sacrifices. Many of these sacrifices are meant for beggars. The beggars are indispensable for the goals to be achieved. There are poor people who will cherish the offerings if given, but they are not designed or designated to be alms receivers. Those professional beggars are considered as agents of the gods. The gods are invisible; whatever is due to them gets across through these beggars. This account for solving African psychosomatic or divine problems through this manner. In the novel, problems are solved in occultic manner. The role played by these beggars in the progress of these people cannot be discarded as most of these people travel to meet the beggars at their locations. The strike of the beggars is not to demonstrate their forces in society struggling for social change; it is primarily a device to illustrate why society should respect the contribution begging makes to the social system as shown by Fall in the novel. They should be cherished and bestowed their right in the society. That of Mour Ndiaye is exposed because of the nature of how and where he has to make the offering, i.e. in different parts of the streets. Other powerful and affluent people, who are just to give alms to these destitute achieve their aims by visiting them in their places to make such offers. The rich ones could not complain of the distance and the condition of the road. This is because they have a mission to accomplish. This is atypical of Africans who do something of such to the beggars who cannot pay back. That is African that bit the finger that feeds. The significance of these people make us to conclude that nobody is not essential in every society.

6. Conclusion

Africa as a society of is of diverse cultural tradition and customs. This is affected by the colonial contact. Colonization affects this culture as the west culture intrudes with the native ones. This brings about many conflicts as reflected in the novel. Many educated dwellers rejected the typical African traditions and promote the western culture. Societal norms differ and it affects the perception values and constitute how members of each community solve their problems. In the African context, for personal and societal progress sacrifices is vital and inevitable. This may not be germane in other culture. The other approach of solving problems in other society may also not be applicable in Africa. There is nothing bad in replicating what transpired in other society, but one's customs and aspirations should not be made to suffer undeservedly. To conclude and to summarize the novel, *The Beggars Strike*, we want to share and agree with Mark Beeman (1992), where he stated thus; "Every society is at every point subject to processes of change; change is ubiquitous. Every society displays at every point dissensus and conflict; social conflict is ubiquitous. Every element in a society renders a contribution to its disintegration and change. Every society is based on coercion of some of its members by others (1959: 163)" The above points show that, change is evident, during the process of change, gains and pains will set in, many will be affected, positively and negatively. The beggars suffered in the novel, their sufferings result in another progress and development. The bureaucrats also had their own share of the whole story.

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