

Leadership as a Bane of African Socio-Political Situation: An Examination of Aminata Sow Fall's: The Beggars' Strike

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Abstract

This paper examines Sow Fall's socio-political vision in her novel *The Beggars' Strike*. The term leadership is defined before a brief summary of the novel. Then Sow Fall's vision of leadership in the African contemporary society is examined against the backdrop of the major incidents in the novel. This is then connected with current social issues in African nation states particularly Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Before contact with the West African society was cohesive. Africans were their brothers' keepers. The advent of western civilization destroyed the communal spirit in Africa. This phenomenon has been glaringly manifested in most African states after independence when the mantle of leadership fell on Africans themselves. This unwholesome trend in the socio-political psyche of Africa has attracted the attention of some creative literary artists among whom is Aminata Sow Fall, the author of *The Beggars' Strike*.

WHO IS A LEADER?

According to Chambers English Dictionary (1990), a leader "is one who goes first or who leads; the head of a party, expedition, etc.." From this definition, we can easily infer that a leader is a person from whom followers take cue on what to do. That is, a leader is supposed to be an example to others particularly his followers.

WHAT THEN IS LEADERSHIP?

According to the same source cited above, leadership is "the office of leader or conductor, those acting as leaders of a particular organization of group; ability to lead, the basic fact is that in any society, group or party, there is usually two types of leadership – good/bad. A good leader would exhibit positive characteristics of a person in leadership position while a bad leader will exhibit the opposite.

In the post colonial era in Africa, the major problem afflicting the society had been bad leadership and this has informed the writings of writers like Ngugi, Soyinka, Iyayi Ousmane, Osofisan, Osundare, Sow Fall and a host of others too numerous to mention here. The writers' vision of society is Marxian in nature in that they feel that the problem in the contemporary African society is that between capital and labour, between the rich and the poor, the masses and bourgeoisie class. Thus these crops of writers assume the position of a watchdog of the society and their writings reflect this. Their stance is in accordance with Aristophane's postulation that "the greatest of the poet is he who has a lesson to teach his people".

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE BEGGARS STRIKE

The plot of the novel is woven round the intention of government to get beggars off the street of an unnamed city in order to promote tourism. The task falls on Mour Ndiaye, the Director of the Department of Public Health and Hygiene, and his assistant, Keba Dabo. The instruction from above had been:

"You realize their presence is harmful to the prestige of our country: they are a running sore which should be kept hidden, at any rate in the capital".

In the process of clearing, the streets of these beggars, some of them are involved in various accidents – minor and major. Notable among those affected by the raids is one disabled beggar Madiabel, who got knocked down by his colleagues (beggars). The unfortunate thing about the clearing is that the government has not made any provision for settling these beggars in a rehabilitation camp with a view to taking care of them. They are merely being removed to the country-side to suffer. As the clearing progresses, a sane voice asks Keba:

"But tell me, Keba, just answer one question, how would they live if they didn't beg! And tell me this as well; who would people give alms to, as they have to give alms to someone, religion tells us so?"

As fate would have it, Mour Ndiaye becomes interested in the post of the vice-president of the nation and he decides to consult his Mallam who tells him;

"...You shall have your wish, if it so pleases God. All you have to do is to sacrifice a fine white ram. You will slaughter it with your own hand... and distribute them to beggars".

Mour finds himself in a dilemma because he has ordered his men to get all the beggars off the streets. He now

sees that his fate is in the hands of the beggars whom he had driven away from their vantage points.

Mour resolves to offer the sacrifice to the beggars at all cost in order to have the vice-president. He therefore mobilizes his men to assist him in locating the beggars. The team of searchers tried to locate the beggars in the city, but their efforts proved abortive. Later the search is moved outside the city to the rural areas.

In a remote village, Mour finds the beggars in the care of one Saila Niang, their leaser. When Mour enters the compound, Saila recognizes him as the Director of the department that ordered their removal from the streets and she decides to have a pound of flesh from Mour. Mour narrates his ordeal;

“This is the reason for my visit to these parts: I have a very, very, important sacrifice to make. You are the ones I going to offer it to...”

Mour orders the beggars to go back to the streets so that he could offer them his sacrifice but he gets this reaction:

“So, Governor, you drove us away and now you’re the one who comes to fetch us back. What may be the reason for this, if I may ask’.

Mour becomes confused and devoid of any explanation. He now realizes that for the moment, the beggars have got the power in their hands. He negotiates with the beggars but to no avail. He distributes money to them and they still refuse to show up and Mour ruminates over the beggars’ attitude and states:

“All in all, they don’t deserve our scorn.... In any case, we only despise them when we don’t need them..... We shall have to find some way of letting them get back their rights as citizens.... Create some organization to which they can be assimilated....., carry out a vast campaign of rehabilitation on their behalf... The need to be educated, as do a large part of the population...”

Mour’s thought is ironical. Is he now aware of the needs of the beggars? Is it now that he realizes that these beggars have equal rights with other members of the population! Unfortunately for Mour, Saila Niang, the leader of the beggars seals Mour’s hope. She says:

“What: it is out of the question, it’s completely out of the question; just because he threw his money at us, we have to give in to his whims;

No: if he threw his money about, it’s because he’d got his pocket full.

No: Nobody budes from here’.

Mour cannot distribute his alms and he loses the post of vice-president to Monsieur Toumane Sane.

COMMENTS

From the plot of the story, we can infer that Mour Ndiaye is acting on instruction from above but he has the opportunity of advising the president about proper rehabilitation of the beggars rather than just removing them from the streets and dumping them in the countryside without any care. It is ironical that it is when he (Mour) needs the services of the beggars that he knows that they are citizens who should be taken care of like others.

The problem of Africans in government is that they regard the masses as human beings only when they need them. Aminata Sow Fall’s vision of people in power is similar so that of Osundare in one of his poems “A Villager’s Protest” in which he refers to politicians as prostitutes who go about with inflated promises when they need the people’s mandate after which they turn ingrates whose mouths will become too honourable to greet.

The beggars have been able to give it back to Mour Ndiaye and he now knows their worth. They are the type of policies similar to the one implemented in this novel in our contemporary society. Such policies are formulated and implemented without considering their implications on the masses. An example in recent time was the clearing of road side petty traders from our streets shortly before the recently concluded World Economic Summit in Abuja without providing alternative stands for them. Most of those people displaced used to get their daily bread from such environment from where they were removed.

CONCLUSION

Leaders in contemporary African society are usually not adequately committed to the welfare of their citizens. Once they can satisfy the needs of their immediate family and those of their cohorts, others can go to hell or even die. Elections into the various tiers of government had come and gone. Those who sought the mandate of the masses would now find it too big to even greet the electorate. But unfortunately many of them know no shame and so would go back to their constituency to seek the mandate of their rejected constituencies as Mour Ndiaye does when he runs to the beggars after throwing them off the streets.

Aminata Sow Fall has creatively demonstrated that leadership is the bane of our society in her novel. The Beggars Strike and like a socialist-realist that she is, she has made the beggars to show Mour Ndiaye that power belongs to God and that the masses are the repository of such power because it is the masses that will give

the leader the mandate through which he will exercise power.

Finally, we would like to observe that the author of *The Beggars Strike* seems to approve of begging which goes against the tenet of Islam. Islam as a religion does not support begging rather it preaches hard work. So Sow Fall, a Muslim adherent, who hails from an Islamic society should have impressed it on her audience that despite the fact that the state should take adequate care of its citizenry, the citizens should also work hard to get their daily bread rather than begging.

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