

Environmental Issues in Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike*: An Artist Impression of an African Social Problem

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Abstract

This study reveals how Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike* uses the elements of event and discourse to communicate a message on the current topical issue of the environment. The message is that the culture of mendicancy and the mendicants themselves constitute an environmental health hazard in biological and psychological terms. The study reveals that the cultural and religious beliefs which have produced and sustained mendicancy and mendicants have had such a powerful grip on the individual and collective psyche of the people who now see government efforts to put an end to mendicancy and the resultant social problems for reasons of national development, as an attempt to destroy their very existence. In this context then, one of Sow Fall's messages in *The Beggars' Strike* is that some of our cultural beliefs and practices are inimical to our national developmental efforts.

Keywords: *The Beggars' Strike*, social problems, environment, beggars, cultural beliefs, national development.

Introduction

It has long been established that literature, understood as imaginative or creative writing, is an art like any other – music, sculpture, painting, etc. One of the many satisfactory discussions of this issue is found in the chapter titled “The Nature of Literature” (Chapter Two) of Wellek and Warren's monumental *Theory of Literature*. As very well explained in the just mentioned work, the medium of the art of literature is language, “as stone or bronze is of sculpture ... or sounds of music”. (Wellek and Warren, 1973: 22). Literature has thus been fittingly called “verbal art”. Usually, the literary artist, whether as a poet, a playwright, or a novelist, uses the medium of language to create a work of art on or about any issue or object in the individual or social life or in the physical environment around him which has set his imagination at work. Thus a work of literary art usually comes out as the artist's imaginative impression of some reality of life or nature, and which conveys to his readers the artist's view or message on such reality.

Aminata Sow Fall, a Senegalese female writer, is acutely conscious of literature as an art created with language, but which must convey some specific message of the artist. This “first woman novelist in francophone black Africa” according to Zell et al. (1983:486), is quoted as having asserted that:

The African writer cannot and must not take up the pen only to offer beautiful expressions and beautiful sentences. The product of society that has its own problems, he can and must contribute to revealing them so that people think about them and find solution to them. (Zell et al., 1983: 486).

By Sow Fall's avowal, her literary art is committed to messages about the problems of her society.

Numerous studies have indeed identified social problems in the works of Aminata Sow Fall, including her second novel, *The Beggars' Strike* (originally published in French as *La Grève des battus*), which is the object of the present study. The business of the present essay is to highlight one of such problems and the message conveyed about it in *The Beggars' Strike*, but which seems to have been ignored by numerous studies on this novel, in spite of the prominence of this problem in the novel, and its topicality in the present-day Senegalese society and elsewhere in the world – it is the issue of healthy environment in general, and the peculiar threat posed to it by the culture of begging for alms in Sow Fall's native Senegal and indeed elsewhere in Africa. This study shall attempt to highlight Sow Fall's treatment of this problem and her message about it through an analysis of the discourse and events in the novel.

Social Problems in *The Beggars' Strike*

Arungwa (1989) opines that Sow Fall's first two novels, *Le Revenant* (The Apparition) and *The Beggars' Strike* (*La Grève des battus*)¹ are “in short, a forum for a long discussion of the multiple problems of a contemporary African State, with a view to solving them and creating a progressive social order.” Arungwa lists “the many topics of great concern” in these novels as “poverty, begging, money cult, false living, class animosity and rivalry, political opportunism, selfishness, nepotism, unequal opportunity, etc.”. With specific regard to *The Beggars' Strike* which is the focus of this essay, Arungwa shows that unequal opportunities in education and employment as well as political opportunism, are some of the social problems which Sow Fall has used the element of fantasy to highlight in the novel. For Sylviane Kamara, social injustice is a major theme in *The*

Beggars' Strike. (cf. Zell et al. 1983:274). According to Kamara as cited by Zell et al. *The Beggars' Strike* carries the message that «...en marginalisant une catégorie de sa population, une société perd une partie fonctionnelle d'elle-même » [...by marginalizing a segment of its population, a society loses a functional part of itself] (our translation). Obinaju (1995) on his part, shows that the problem of human rights abuse is a significant theme in *The Beggars' Strike*, and submits that “from that perspective, the novel is a demonstration of the fact that whether we are rich or poor, man or woman, and indeed white, yellow or black, we need to respect one another for what we are - human being.”

Aminata Sow Fall has herself stated that the people's mentality and comportment about begging is a significant subject matter in the novel. She has been quoted to have said in an interview that “there are beggars who forsake their dignity and who cultivate a certain habit, and there are people who cultivate a certain form of conceit by encouraging begging”. (Zell et al, 1983:487). In a summary of parts of the said interview in Zell et al., we are told that the novel was indeed inspired by a scene which the novelist witnessed one day in the street involving beggars:

The idea of the novel came to her one day when she saw a group of beggars fighting over a bowl (*battu* in Wolof) of cous-cous that someone had given them. Whoever gave them the food, she thought, had felt the need to give, and she wondered what people would do if beggars began to refuse their offerings.

As can be deduced from the foregoing, critical opinion has established Sow Fall as a socially committed writer, and *The Beggars' Strike* in particular has been shown to be concerned with social issues. However, beside those social issues that have so far been identified in this novel, there are others that are of significance and carry topical messages in the novel. One such issue is the environmental problems posed by beggars in the cities. As we shall endeavour to show in the remaining part of this discussion, the composition of *The Beggars' Strike* has employed some devices which leave no doubt in the mind of the perceptive reader about the author's view of beggars as a source of environmental health problems in our cities.

Beggars and Environmental Problems in *The Beggars' Strike* (TBS)

Shortly after the novel opens, the reader is brought to the scene where Mr. Mour Ndiaye, the Director of the Department of Public Health and Hygiene is reminding his Assistant, Mr. Keba Dabo, of the Minister's order that the city be cleared of beggars, and urging him (Mr. Dabo), to take a more decisive action in this regard. For Ndiaye, such action is necessary and urgent because, besides the fact that the beggars constitute “a running sore” which turns away tourists from the country, thereby threatening the national economy by depriving it of foreign exchange earned from tourism, there is the added responsibility that “we really can't let them invade our cities and form a threat to public hygiene.” (TBS, pp.2-3).

It is in fact pertinent to note clearly that the threat to national economy is only a consequence of the threat to public health, since quite logically, it is the latter threat that will turn away tourists from the country, bringing about the former threat. This point becomes clearer in Ndiaye's conversation with his marabout², Serigne Birama (TBS, pp.17-18). The primary problem posed by the beggars is therefore that of threatening public health. A description of the beggars gathered in the courtyard of one of their fellows talks of “ulcerated limbs, covered with the postules of scabies or eaten away with leprosy... rags which leave half naked bodies which have long been innocent of any contact with water” (TBS, p.9). This description of the beggars actively conjures up in the reader's mind the idea that the exposure and free circulation of these beggars in the society is a health hazard to the populace. The same goes for the remark which describes the beggars as “these folk who poison the air with their smell” (TBS, p.14), as well as such remarks about clearing the streets of “their human pollution problem” (TBS, p.32), about “polluting the atmosphere again if the beggars are brought back into the city” (TBS, p.72), about “the necessity to clear the ... insanitary zone of the residential area” (TBS, p.68).

It is not only the physiological aspect of health that is threatened by the beggars, as the above analysis might suggest. Sow Fall has equally shown in the novel that the beggars also pose a psychological health problem in the society. The zeal with which Mr. Dabo tackles his assignment of ridding the city of beggars is clearly shown by the words and expressions which are used to present it. These words clearly show what the beggars have done to Dabo's frame of mind by their attitude towards the other members of the society. In an authorial comment, we are shown that Dabo's dislike for the beggars has become something of an obsession. He has an almost morbid fear of driving through the city; he's constantly afraid of meeting beggars; and he has a choking sensation in his throat if one should unfortunately cross his path (TBS, p.14). Such expressions as ‘obsession’, “morbid fear”, “choking sensation” used by the author graphically communicate a state of psychological ill-health. Beside authorial comments, this state of health is also communicated through the language with which the characters describe the attitude of the beggars towards the members of the society. For instance, in an argument with his secretary Miss Sagar Diouf, who tries to convince him that it is useless to try to rid the city of beggars, Mr. Dabo remarks:

Don't you feel anything when they approach you...no it's not a matter of approaching –they accost you, they attack you, they jump out at you! That's it, they jump out at you! Don't you feel anything when they jump out at you? (TBS, p.15).

Describing the beggar's approach to people while asking for alms as an "attack", as "jumping out at" people, certainly translates a tensed up state of mind. If we accept the point that Keba Dabo represents the urban population, or a certain segment of it at least, then we must accept that the psychological ill-health caused him by beggars is representative of the problem which begging and the beggars cause to members of the urban public.

Besides the use of language, Sow Fall has also used scenes and events to communicate the idea that the beggars pose a health hazard to the public. For instance, we meet through the eyes of Mour Ndiaye "this crowd of beggars moving about, ... or lying asleep or scratching themselves amidst the continuous squalling of babies..." We are shown "as if projected onto a screen, the image of so many physical defects, so much physical decrepitude and human disintegration" (TBS, p.80). We are shown scenes filled with 'odour of putrid flesh', with "ulcerated limbs, covered with the postules of scabies or eaten away with leprosy", with "rags" and "bodies which have long been innocent of any contact with water." Such a human environment must certainly be a health hazard to those who may frequent it.

It is noteworthy that the novel opens with a presentation of the health problems posed by the beggars to members of the society, as represented by Mr. Keba Dabo's agitated frame of mind (TBS, p.1). This is a foregrounding technique employed by the novelist to underscore the import of the health problems posed by beggars in the society.

In her artistic presentation of the phenomenon of begging and beggars in the cities of her native Senegal, Aminata Sow Fall has communicated a message, and a significant one for that matter, about the environment – she has shown that beggars constitute an environmental "plague", to employ a term which Sow Fall has lent to one of her characters, Mr. Keba Dabo (TBS, p. 15).

The Beggars' Strike and Obstacles to the solution of the Environmental Problems of Beggars.

Sow Fall's concern with the environmental health problems posed by beggars does not however stop at merely highlighting these problems. She has gone on to highlight the challenges which confront the measures which aim at solving these problems. In this respect, the novel is basically the story of the drama triggered off by the attempt to tackle the threat which beggars pose to public hygiene. The Minister had ordered the Director of the Department of Public Health and Hygiene, Mr. Mour Ndiaye, to tackle this threat by clearing the city of beggars. Under the efficient planning and supervision of Mr. Ndiaye's assistant, Mr. Dabo, the beggars are raided, caught, and loaded into trucks, and carted away to far off locations from where, it is believed, they cannot get back into the city. As the beggars resist this measure, and find their way back into the city, a drama ensues: the raids increase in frequency and intensity, offenders are brutalised, perhaps as a deterrent; the beggars, as a protest against their inhuman treatment and the violation of their status "as citizens with full rights like everyone else" (TBS, p.37), go on strike by withdrawing from the city to the house of a colleague of theirs in a distant suburb; the society is thrown into trauma and people now have to literally run after the beggars and plead with them to receive alms. It is this drama which reveals the challenge that confronts the measures aimed at solving the problems posed by the beggars. This challenge must be seen essentially in terms of the mentality of the people, fed by their traditional and religious beliefs and practices. The traditional aspect of this mentality is seen, for instance, when Sagar Diouf, Mr. Dabo's secretary, trying to dissuade her boss from ridding the city of beggars, argues as follows:

You know, Keba, you're wasting your time with the beggars. They've been here since the time of our great-great-grandparents ... In any case what's the idea of trying to get rid of them? What harm have they done to you? (TBS, p. 15).

The people give to beggars as a tradition or custom to which they have been used over time, and with which they find nothing wrong. Moreover, this custom has a superstitious foundation or colour. The people believe in the magical powers of alms-giving to procure one's heart's desires. This is interestingly explained for instance by Salla Niang as she tried to mobilize her fellow beggars for the strike action:

Where will you find a man who's the boss who doesn't give to charity so that he can stay the boss? Where will you find a man who's suffering from a real or imaginary illness and who doesn't believe that his troubles will disappear the moment a donation leaves his hands? Where will you find an ambitious young man who doesn't think that the magic effects of charity can open all doors?... Even the parents of a man who's awaiting judgement, expecting to be condemned, have recourse to charity, to blur the judge's

reasoning in the hope of an acquittal. (TBS, p. 39).

Indeed Salla Niang is echoing the ideas which another beggar, Nguirane, has been telling the others, to prove to them the feasibility of the strike which he proposes they should embark upon. (TBS, pp. 37-38). One can then understand why marabouts³ are always prescribing to their clients alms-giving and sacrifices which consist of making donations to the poor and the beggars, as we see so many times in the novel. One such instance which is very significant to the plot of *The Beggars' Strike* is seen in Mr. Mour Ndiaye who religiously believes the prescriptions of the weird Kifi Bokoul, and puts in everything in an effort of carry them out to the letter, in the hope of securing the post of Vice-President of the Republic.

People also give to beggars because religion so teaches. Sagar Diouf pursues her argument with her boss, Mr. Keba Dabo in the following words:

And besides, religion teaches us we must help the poor. How could they live otherwise? Who would people give alms to, as they have to give alms to someone, religion tells us so? (TBS, p. 15).

It is interesting to note that the beggars themselves are conscious of this religious teaching and confidently use it to justify their life-style, and even claim it as a right. As one of the beggars explains, "those who are better off must give some of their wealth to the poorer ones. That's what religion says: when we beg, we just claim what is our due". (TBS, p. 61).

The strength of the people's mentality about begging for and giving of alms, born of their traditional and religious beliefs about alms, did not only trigger off the drama in *The Beggar' Strike*, but also complicated it, leading on to Sow Fall's ultimate message on the issue of the solution to some of the social problems of our society. The beggars had found so much strength in the people's beliefs about almsgiving that they decided to hold the people to ransom by rejecting the people's offerings. Nguirane Sare for instance points out that:

The 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, to maintain their hopes ... (TBS, p. 22).

It is the grip that these beliefs have on the people that serves as the basis for the beggars' resolve, urged here by one of them, Salla Niang: "... we'll all stay here! In a very short time, you'll see that we are as necessary to them as the air they breathe". (TBS, p. 39). On the side of the rest of the society, it is the strength of the people's belief in the power of alms, especially when they have been prescribed as sacrificial offerings by marabouts, that makes Mour Ndiaye for instance, to decide, saying: "This offering ... I shall make it in the prescribed manner... whatever it may cost me ... I shall have the post of Vice-President ... I must have it". (TBS, p.70). Mr. Ndiaye said this as he pondered on the sacrificial offerings prescribed for him by the weird-looking marabout, Kifi Bokoul, to enable him (Ndiaye) get appointed as the Vice-President of his country. Sequel to this, we see Mr. Ndiaye, the Director of the Department of Public Health and Hygiene which planned and executed the evacuation of the beggars from the city, trying to get his Minister to halt the evacuation, arguing that it is inhuman (TBS, p.68), while in actual fact, he wants the beggars to remain at their posts in the city so that he can distribute alms to them as prescribed by his marabout. Having failed in this bid, Mr. Ndiaye next goes to plead with his assistant, Mr. Dabo, to go and invite the beggars back into the city to enable him make his sacrificial offering to them in the streets. And when Mr. Dabo would not cooperate, Ndiaye goes himself to invite the beggars back into the city, even if for a few hours. The beggars, to whom he had introduced himself as Mour Ndiaye, the Director of the Department responsible for their evacuation, treat him with contempt as he addresses them, but he swallows it all and persists. They promise to turn up in the city, but would not. And the desperate Mr. Ndiaye gets the offerings to the beggars in their resort. All this is a demonstration of the strength of the people's belief in the efficacy of alms-giving.

If everything lay in the power of Mr. Ndiaye the beggars would have returned to the streets of the city, and the whole business of evacuating them from the city as a measure for solving the environmental problem caused by them would have come to nought. The general malaise and even trauma into which the evacuation of the beggars and the resultant strike by the latter throw the whole society testify to the fact that, like Mr. Mour Ndiaye, the populace as a whole would rather live with the environmental problems of the beggars for sake of maintaining their psycho-social equilibrium nurtured by their cultural beliefs. Aminata Sow Fall thus clearly shows in *The Beggars' Strike* that cultural beliefs could be a powerful obstacle to solving the social problems posed by beggars. This very much appears of be the message arising from her concerns about the environmental problems of her society.

Conclusion: The Significance of Sow Fall's Environmental Concerns in *The Beggars' Strike*

Only a high degree of sensitivity to social issues can make a socially committed writer. For quite some time now, concern for a safe and conducive environment has been one of the major issues engaging the attention of the human society. The socially committed writer that Sow Fall is, she could not have remained untouched and

uninfluenced by the global concern for the environment, considered as “the sum of all external conditions and influences affecting the life and development of organism” (Bates, 1968), and which, in the case of man, includes the physical, social, psychological and biological elements. Aminata Sow Fall could not have ignored the ideas and spectacular activities which this concern for the environment has since generated, leading to and following the famous conference of 113 nations of the world in Stockholm, Sweden, on June 5-16, 1972, under the auspices of UNO, with the declaration of June 5 of every year as the World Environment Day. If this premise is valid, then Sow Fall could not have so graphically observed as she has done in *The Beggars' Strike*, the phenomenon of begging, and beggars in her society, without clearly seeing one of the obvious resultant social problems – the effect the environment.

As this study of *The Beggars' Strike* has attempted to show, the composition of this novel as a work of art has actually communicated to its readers the idea that beggars are an environmental health hazard, among the other problems they pose in the society. This study has also attempted to show that beyond merely presenting the beggars as an environmental health hazard, *The Beggar's Strike* has gone on to present the idea that cultural beliefs and practices could seriously threaten the success of measures aimed at tackling this social problem.

In concluding this study of *The Beggars' Strike*, an important point to make is that if Aminata Sow Fall created the novel and communicated in it the above message from what she has observed in the society of her native Senegal, as we saw in the introduction to this essay, the message could have significance wherever the social phenomenon of begging and beggars exists, and in particular in our African cities. In this regard, it may be of interest to mention here that begging for a living is also a social phenomenon in Nigeria, the country of the author of this essay. For instance, an article titled “Daily Bread from the Streets” in *This Week*, a newsmagazine published in Lagos (June 1, 1987 pp. 36-37) reported certain aspects of this phenomenon in Nigeria, similar to what is presented in *The Beggars' Strike*. In the article, a State Government Commissioner is reported to have “noted that beggars have constituted a social menace for some time”, just as we find them doing in Sow Fall’s novel. The Commissioner is also reported to have been “holding talks with religious leaders to have them dissuade their parishioners from giving alms to beggars”. This shows that in Nigeria, this phenomenon also has some root in religious beliefs and practices. Quite interestingly again, the Commissioner’s revelation that “moves are afoot to clear (the beggar) off the streets”, and the statement by a Federal Chief Social Development Officer that ‘we routinely carry out arrest operations ... with a view to deporting them’, show that the same methods as we find in *The Beggars' Strike* are applied in tackling the problem of beggars’ menace in Nigeria.

For Nigeria, as for other societies with similar experiences, Sow Fall’ novel is certainly relevant. The beggars may never go on strike anywhere, not even in the Senegalese cities. This ‘different order of reality’, this “second handle on existence” which Sow Fall created from her imagination (cf. Achebe, cited by Ugah, 1990:75) was merely a symbolic, and thus an artistic vehicle for some messages. The specific message that beggars constitute an environmental health hazard may be quite obvious; but it could as well be new to people who have not observed it. So also may be the message that cultural beliefs and practices do constitute impediments to the solution of social problems. These messages could be useful to those hitherto ignorant of these ideas in whichever societies the experiences in question exist. As they become aware of these ideas, they could re-order their methods and strategies, and thus devise more effective ways of tackling the problems. It is in this way that ‘writers - those bright hopes of our society’ (Achebe, 1975:51) become, as P. B. Shelley saw them long ago “the unacknowledged legislators of the world”. Society has always benefited from the visions in artists’ impressions of reality, even if it hardly acknowledges this. Sow Fall’s concern for the environment, and her messages about it certainly hold something valuable for her native society of Senegal, as for other African societies that have the begging phenomenon.

Notes

1. *La Grève des Battu* is the title of the original version of Sow Fall’s second novel, published in French in 1979. The English version used for this study was translated by Dorothy Blair and published in 1981 under the title of *The Beggars' Strike* in the Longman’s Drumbeat Series. All pages references made in this essay to his novel are as found in this English version.
2. In the glossary of Senegalese local terms given by the Translator in the English version of the novel, a marabout is “a saintly Muslim teacher or holy man, sometimes a hermit and usually distinguished by his ascetism. Marabouts are widely consulted for advice on many material and practical problems of existence, and in contemporary Senegalese works of fiction there is a tendency to criticise the hold they have over the population.”

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