



## **Building a Virile African Society through Irony: A Case Study of Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike***

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### ***Abstract***

It can never be gain - said that in any given society there would definitely be the haves and the have-nots. In fact, the groups of people in any society consist of working class, the middle class and the upper class and that each class has its roles for the wellbeing of that very society. The novel under study portrays life in an Islamic/Muslim country called Senegal. The writer engages irony to sensitize her society to shun cruelty towards certain categories of people in the society that is vastly dancing to the tunes of fleeting western values. The paper, scrutinizing the primary text, aspires to appraise the literary work with a view to showing how she uses irony to impact and teach her society memorable lessons. The paper concludes by giving tangible suggestions not only to African leaders but leaders in other nations of the world.

### **Introduction**

African societies are filled with literary experts who have used their talents and literary works to teach or pass one invaluable lesson or the other. To them, literature helps someone to achieve what he/she

wants, they usually engage literature to resolve present or perceived future challenges they have or think may crop up. Aminata Sow Fall - a Senegalese woman-writer is one of these writers, she uses her rather

ironical novel *The Beggars' Strike* (1981) to educate the government officials, the entire Senegal citizens and all the audience of her work that every human being has his/her usefulness including the sick, the invalid and the poor. The beggars themselves are not omissible part of the society, this could be why Beeman (1992) believes that the novel in question describes the beggars as an integral part of the society's social structure, and that when they are removed, profound disruptions are inevitable in peoples' everyday lives in the society. He further stresses the fact that Fall's novel constructs a paradigmatic framework to help the readers to grasp and appreciate how begging suits or fits into West African society.

### **The Term Literature**

According to Willmont (1979), "Literature is the window which the writer uses to peep and project into the totality of human experience". Orji (2009)'s perception of literature is similar to that of Willmont when he sees it as 'a form of art, which recreates, reproduces and represents experiences of life, usually done through the use of language'.

The word 'experience' stands out in the above two definitions and the entire beggars in the novel under study have unwholesome experiences. The tormentors/annihilators of these beggars are later seen begging the beggars and one cannot but wonder who the real beggars are! It is a stunning irony to later see Mouir Ndaiye, the Director of the Department of Public Health and Hygiene, begging the Beggars, entreating them, with intense fervour, to go back to the streets, the ambition which he never realize throughout the entire story.

### **The Term Irony**

Irony is saying something when the opposite is meant. In fact it is a share contradiction between circumstances and expectations even condition contrary to what might be expected. Many literary experts, scholars and writers have defined irony in diverse forms, Nwachukwu-Agbada, Omobowale, Ododo and Adebisi-Adelabu, (2019) Irony is 'a mode of expression through words (Verbal Irony) or events (Irony of Situation), conveying a reality different from, and usually opposite to appearance or expectation. Some describe irony as saying one thing and meaning another. A writer may say the opposite of what he means, create a reversal between expectation and its fulfillment or give the audience a

piece of knowledge that a character lacks, making the characters word yield a meaning to the audience contrary to what such words mean to the character in question’.

Olanrele (2001) on his own defines irony as “a figure of speech that means the opposite of what was expressed or meant” he goes further to say that ‘other forms of irony include: Irony of Life, Irony of Situation and Dramatic Irony’. In the work, the novelist cleverly and intelligently makes use of this figure of speech (irony) to wage war against brutality and cruelty of the government and her agencies to the innocent poor and the sick ones.

### **Short Notes on Aminata Sow Fall**

Aminata Sow Fall was born in Saint Louis, Senegal on 27 April, in the year 1941. Although her native language is said to be Wolof, her books were written in French. She had her secondary education in Dakar and also educated in France. After her education, Fall moved back to Senegal and later worked as a teacher, she served the Commission for Education Reform that was responsible for the introduction of African Literature into French language. Fall is reputed to be one of the earliest and best Francophone African women Writers. *The Beggars’ Strike* is said to be her second novel which was originally published in French.

### **Textual Analysis**

Right from the title on the cover-page of this 99-page prose-fiction work, the audience of Aminata Sow Fall should sense the verbal irony in “The Beggars’ Strike”. The common saying “Beggars have no choice” is outwitted here! Furthermore, the hatred directed towards the beggars in this city stares one in the face at the entrance of the work. In fact the opening paragraph in the very first chapter of the novel reveals the incalculable aversion, or repugnance of mind which the entire populace, especially the government officials and agencies have towards the beggars. Fall writes:

*This morning there has been another article about it in the newspapers, about how the streets are congested with these beggars, these talibes, these lepers and cripples, all these derelicts. The capital must be cleared of these people*

*– parodies of Human beings rather - these dregs of society who beset you everywhere and attack without provocation at all times... (p. 1)*

The novelist who seems to pose as the beggars advocate/counsel goes on to enable her audience know what this society perceives of the beggars, they are seen according to her as ‘another obstacle aside that of traffic lights’ (p. 1) they are indeed seen as nuisance who “embarrasses” people in the streets, offices, other work place and even in the places of worship especially on Fridays:

*...on Friday he had the misfortune to be in a Lebanese Merchants shop now, everyone knows that on Fridays the streets are clogged up with beggars, .....(p. 1)*

Mike Edung (2014) seems not to entirely frown on keeping the beggars out of the streets as he analyses the novel from environmental point of view and that the beggars really create both physiological and psychological health issues to other citizens, he is of the opinion that the total wellbeing of the entire populace i.e. their mental health, their emotional health and even their behavioral characteristics are threatened by the beggars. All this notwithstanding Mike Edung seems to be saying that Fall, using her novel, is asking for a positive mindset for the beggars in the Senegalese society.

The readers are surprised to see that in this city called Republic, laws are put in place not to give alms to beggars and that people are to “conform to the principle .... never to give alms to beggars ... (p. 2)” what concerns Mour Ndiaye (the Director of the public health services), Keba Dabo and other security agents, is the money the country realizes from tourism and not the welfare and wellbeing of the citizens, beggars especially, who are, themselves, part of the citizenry of the nation, we see Ndiaye fuming:

*Keba it's not a question of understanding it's a question of finding some way of getting rid of these people. Our Department's reputation is at stake... 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. This year the number of tourists has fallen considerably, in comparison with*

*last year's figures, and it's almost certain that these beggars are to some extent responsible... (p. 3)*

What an irony, later on in the work, it is these same “unwanted lepers” that must be sought after, for things to go normal in the Republic and its environs! In the novel, Mour Ndaiye & Keba Dabo represent the capitalists, the oppressors and the wicked leaders who detest more often than not, the well-being of the proletariat, the poor and the sick, even when Sagar (who stands as a figure of good conscience in the novel) keeps on admonishing Keba Dabo to let the beggars be, he would not listen to him. According to Sagar, Keba Dabo is just wasting his time with the beggars because “they’ve been here since the time of our great-great grandparents. They were there when you came into the world and they will be there when you leave it...” (p. 15) what this individual is saying is that fingers can never be equal and that to be happy in life, one must be ready to cope with the inequalities of life. The power-drunk, class conscious and the class seeking Keba Dabo would not listen as he confronts Sagar with his rhetorical questions:

*You don't understand, Sagar... 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, .....Don't you feel anything when they jump out at you... (p. 15)*

### **Acts and attitudes of violence towards beggars in the novel**

In chapter four, we begin to see the inhuman treatment of the police men whom the beggars refer to as “madmen” towards the beggars – they persecute them as they come from time to time to raid and maltreat any beggar in sight in the streets. One of the beggars cried out:

*They laid into me today. They tore my clothes, confiscated my stick and broke my glasses. It's too much, it is too much. Is that a way to treat a human being” Nguirane is at the end of his tether. Blood is oozing from a cut over his right eye... they are quite vicious... They are worse than mad dogs” (p. 20)*

All government agents (especially those saddled with removing the beggars and cleansing the city) seem to hate seeing these wretched people. They pick and transfer them to far places and long distance particularly where there is no means of transporting themselves (the beggars) back to the city. It is as bad as inflicting wounds and maltreating anyone of them that resist the abuse. The maltreatment, according to Fall, is heart-rending as she goes ahead to paint the scenario that:

*All the beggars are afraid now – they are being ceaselessly hunted down without respite. They are afraid and they suffer physically, ... armed only with the hope of being able to rely on the speed of their legs to escape from the stinging blows of the policeman's batons... it is pure bloody-mindedness that's all. (p. 20).*

The author seems to have assumed the position of spokesperson or lawyer for the defense of the beggars. She is seen, engaging her gripping novel to mobilize or garner people's sympathy as she paints the picture of agony, anguish and distress by her choice of special words on pages 18, 19, 20, 21, and 22 etc. such as 'persecution', 'hunted down', 'injuries', 'they suffer', 'beaten', 'bloody' and 'groaning'. In fact harvesting all these gory lexical items in the novel seems herculean.

Violence gets to crescendo against the beggars in the work as some are beaten to installmental deaths:

*Madiabel had died of his injuries. He had lain at the hospital for five days without treatment, because he hadn't a penny on him, and to prove he was a pauper he had to have a certificate from the local authority, and as he was too badly injured to go and get this certificate of indigence which would exempt him from having to pay for treatment... he had lain in a corner... whenever he groaned and writhed with pain that racked him. The day of his funeral... (p. 21)*

After much treatment of alienation and affliction this under-privileged men and women suffered in their very father-land, the suggestion to get organized, given

by Nguirane (one of the beggars) become the watershed in the lives of these paupers and mendicants. They eventually freed themselves from the clutches and rough-handling of the wicked government administrators and officials when they are pushed to the wall.

### **Theme of class struggle**

Mour is seen doing all he could do to become the vice president of the Republic, he has forgotten that he was never a person to reckon with in the society before, now he is seen in the novel taking the second wife (an educated, modern and very sophisticated woman for that matter). He has totally forgotten that he has a very humble beginning, he is now being deadly ambitious, throwing caution to the wind, climbing political-social ladder to the top by all means is a goal he must achieve. Lolli, his wife has to remind him that she was the one ‘who ran to the marabouts for you’ (p. 31) in fact, the wife reminisces her endurance with her poor husband “where did all the money go, that my father and brothers gave me because they were sorry for me? Into the pockets of marabouts, to unlock the doors to better times for you! ...” The wife further says she has to sell her belongings so as to cope with life when things were tough for them as a couple “...and where did all my boubous disappear to, leaving me with only one to my back that I wore month in month out?” (p. 31) Fall appears to deliberately include the above to reveal how African leaders easily forget their antecedents and trajectory in life.

Fall paints an awesome picture of ‘war’ between the rich-state bureaucrats and the poor (beggars) in the novel as she writes “The beggars are in a flutter of disquiet, there is a rumble and a grumble of suppressed anger. They have just returned from the Old Gorgui Diop’s funeral... Tired of being clobbered! Tired of being hunted. Tired of running... heavy-hearted, drenched in perspiration... (p. 36). Any reader cannot but feel for these people who are in this situation that the author describes.

### **Theme of Turning Point**

The audience is dazed as they are made to see the turning points coming up in the lives of the beggars. They have been frustrated beyond measure and they start to think straight for the very first time. One of them says:

*Now, my friends, the hour has come to make our choice: to live like dogs pursued, hunted, tracked down, rough-handled, or to live like men. (p. 38)*

The beggar continues reasoning out to others:

*So now, let's have no more of stealing in and out on the sly, let's have no more of this running away like mad, let's all stay here... In a very short time you'll see that we are all necessary to them as air they breathe. Where will you find a man who's the boss and who doesn't give to charity so that he can stay the boss? (p. 39)*

True to the saying and expectations of the beggars, all the elevated men and women in town begin to visit this hitherto unwanted species of humans in their home. Mour Ndiaye the chief-enemy of the beggars is not left out. For him to become the vice president of the Republic, he has to make sacrifices and give alms to the beggars in their different locations which they usually stay daily! The voice and the instructions of his marabout haunts him daily:

*'You will have what you desire, and you will have it very shortly. You will be vice president. To achieve this you must sacrifice a bull... You will distribute to the b'attu bearers... They are beggars who walks about the street to beg... this offering must go to its correct destinations, otherwise everything risks going wrong.'* (p. 58).

What a warning message, the writer seems to be warning her audience that the rich and the poor should aspire to have symbiotic relationship, and that for any man to attain/achieve any worthwhile thing in life, he/she needs others no matter how seemingly unimportant they are. The beggars eventually won the battle of their lives as we read thus:

*The beggars are living like princes; they are even beginning to get bored at having nothing to do from morning to evening*



*donations rain from heaven and lately they have noticed greater crowds and more generous gifts. (p. 60)*

Ndiaye is one of these crowds as “he is convinced that from this moment his whole fate is in the hands of the beggars who he had driven away from their vantage points”. (p. 66)

### **Some Identified Ironic Happenings**

It is irony of life that Mour who is, hitherto never seen by beggars physically but usually heard about on radios and newspapers by the beggars, now go visiting them in their home or in their camp. Furthermore, it is ironical that the beggars whom the state usually thinks discourage tourism, their house now becomes a tourist center of some sort as many highly placed men & women visit them every day! It is irony of life that the almighty boss - Mour Ndiaye is later seen seriously begging his assistant (Keba Dabo), so as to assist him in reaching to the beggars to get back to the streets, their former locations, begging. This could be the reason why Udousoro (2023) submits unambiguously that ‘The beggars, conscious of their importance and in fact relevance in the society decide to fight back. Their strike has far reaching consequences on Mour Ndiaye, the man behind the beggar’s marginalization, but whose success at the polls as vice president of the country depends on the beggars’ cooperation with him. Mour fails the election and learnt too late that the ‘strong’ need the ‘weak’ and less privileged to survive...’ It is also ironical that the esteemed and enviable position of the vice presidency could be achieved via sacrifices to the mendicants in the streets. Finally, it is also an irony of life that an important personality like Ndiaye (vice president aspirant) could be angered by the beggars and he would still stomach his pride in order not to anger beggars! What a world of unexplainable wonders!!!

### **Suggestions & Conclusion**

*The Beggars Strike* as we could see is a powerful touching story that preaches and teaches tolerance and interdependence of the rich and the poor in the human

society. Fall in this her 99-page work, could be described as the masses' and the poor's spokesperson. As an artist that is confident of her art, she makes use of irony right from the cover page of the book. Ndiaye wages war against the beggars, the war which he eventually utterly lost.

Fall, indirectly, is saying that nobody wages war against nature and win. This irony saturated work should prick the conscience of all the leaders in Africa and all nations of the world. In the light of the foregoing, it is suggested that:

One, all human beings, irrespective of their social statuses should begin to see one another as comrades and partners in progress. There is no human being entirely useless and so the relationship should be symbiotic. Two, in any given society, the survival of one is the survival of all. Apart from the foregoing, the government must realize that the betterment of the citizenry is their sole responsibility and that the existence of all citizens is the reason behind her existence. The well-being of all is the primary thing while every other thing is secondary.

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