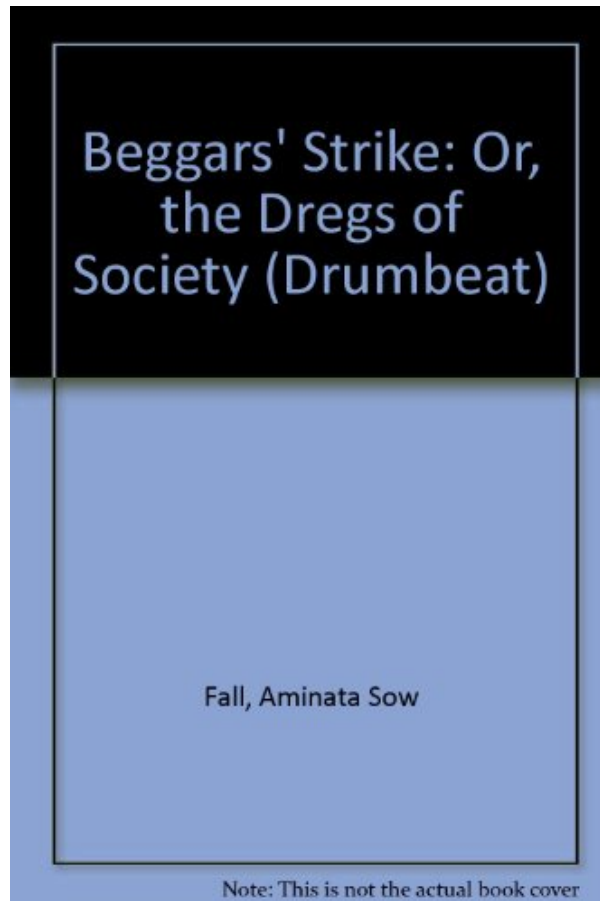


THE BEGGARS' STRIKE, OR, THE DREGS OF SOCIETY BY AMINATA SOW FALL



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Beggars' Strike: Or, the Dregs of Society (Drumbeat)

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Review

The beggars are becoming a problem in The Capital; their physical deformities and constant presence are scaring away the tourists. It is up to Mour Diyae, Director of Public Health and Hygiene, to clear the streets, a job he quickly passes on to his competent assistant Keba Dabo. While Mour sees the problem as a way to self-promotion, Keba approaches the task with a zeal born out of his own childhood of poverty and pride. Soon, after beatings and repeated imprisonment, the beggars leave the streets, but a new problem arises. People must give alms to the poor to insure spiritual favor and earthly rewards. A marabout, or holy man, tells Mour Diyae that he will become Vice-President if he gives certain gifts to real beggars on the streets. But the beggars now congregate and receive alms at a house far out of town and they see no need to return to the streets to help the man that persecuted them. Mour Diyae is in a dilemma, made all the worse by the frustrations of his young, new, second wife. Quick and sharp, Aminata Sow Fall moves like a bantam-weight fighter through this fast-paced, satirical novel, jabbing deftly at her targets of patriarchy, polygamy, privilege, and hypocrisy. -- For great reviews of books for girls, check out *Let's Hear It for the Girls: 375 Great Books for Readers 2-14*. -- From *500 Great Books by Women*; review by Erica Bauermeister

Language Notes

Text: English, French (translation)

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- Published on: 1981-07-20
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- 112 pages

Review

The beggars are becoming a problem in The Capital; their physical deformities and constant presence are scaring away the tourists. It is up to Mour Diyae, Director of Public Health and Hygiene, to clear the streets, a job he quickly passes on to his competent assistant Keba Dabo. While Mour sees the problem as a way to self-promotion, Keba approaches the task with a zeal born out of his own childhood of poverty and pride. Soon, after beatings and repeated imprisonment, the beggars leave the streets, but a new problem arises. People must give alms to the poor to insure spiritual favor and earthly rewards. A marabout, or holy man, tells Mour Diyae that he will become Vice-President if he gives certain gifts to real beggars on the streets. But the beggars now congregate and receive alms at a house far out of town and they see no need to return to the streets to help the man that persecuted them. Mour Diyae is in a dilemma, made all the worse by the frustrations of his young, new, second wife. Quick and sharp, Aminata Sow Fall moves like a bantam-weight fighter through this fast-paced, satirical novel, jabbing deftly at her targets of patriarchy, polygamy, privilege, and hypocrisy. -- For great reviews of books for girls, check out *Let's Hear It for the Girls: 375 Great Books for Readers 2-14*. -- From *500 Great Books by Women*; review by Erica Bauermeister

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Most helpful customer reviews

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The predicament: between a rock and a hard place

By Martina A. Nicolls

The Beggar's Strike (1979 in French and 1981 in English) is set in an unstated country in West Africa in a city known only as The Capital. Undoubtedly, Senegalese author Sow Fall writes of her own experiences.

Mour Ndiaye is the Director of the Department of Public Health and Hygiene, with the opportunity of a distinguished and coveted promotion to Vice-President of the Republic. Tourism has declined and the government blames the local beggars in The Capital. Ndiaye must rid the streets of beggars, according to a decree from the Minister. Ndiaye instructs his department to carry out weekly raids.

One of the raids leads to the death of lame beggar, Madiabel, who ran into an oncoming vehicle as he tried to escape, leaving two wives and eight children. Soon after, another raid resulted in the death of the old well-loved, comic beggar Papa Gorgui Diop. Enough was enough, declared the beggars.

For the beggars, they were good citizens practicing a `trade' that supports the ethos of the Islamic nation: giving and receiving. By tradition, people of the city need to give alms to beggars in exchange for prayers for long life and prosperity - for `self-preservation.' Zakat is one of the obligatory Five Pillars of Islam in which a portion of one's wealth is given to the poorest of the poor, the people of the streets. It is, therefore, a religious duty. The beggars are disgusted that they have to pay the price for tourism and economic progress.

For the beggars, they are as necessary to citizens of The Capital as the 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? 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? Even the parents of a man ... expecting to be condemned, have recourse to charity ... in the hope of an acquittal." Their strategy to express their repugnance of the raids is to get organized - into an alliance, an allegiance, a union - and strike!

If the beggar's strike, how will people manage to fulfill their religious duty. And that is the premise of the story.

Mour Ndiaye wants to ensure he gets the promotion. He consults a holy man who issues specific instructions to give alms to the beggars, but only to those in their usual locations. However, the beggars have left the streets and moved en masse to the new Slum-Clearance Resettlement Area, a remote location outside the city. Ndiaye panics. People panic. They drive to the resettlement area and form long queues. Ndiaye is in a ridiculous predicament - his job is to eliminate the beggars from the streets, but in order to receive a promotion, the holy man says that the beggars have to be on the streets so that Ndiaye can provide them with generous charity. How can Ndiaye convince them to return to the streets so that he can become Vice-President?

The novella - a long short story or a short long story - of only 99 pages is comical satire, full of wit and succinct dialogue. It's a delightful, fun, engaging tale, but with enough situational substance to deserve the 1980 Grand Prix de Literature de l'Afrique Noire.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.
light little satire of class dynamics and superstition
By David Evans

Mour Diaye, the Director of the Department of Public Health and Hygiene, clears the streets of his unnamed African capital of beggars. In return, he hopes to be promoted to vice-president of the nation. To ensure his appointment, he consults a marabout - a Muslim holy man (according to the book's glossary) - who instructs him to offer a sacrifice to the beggars in their customary locations. But the beggars are all gone!

La Grève Des Bâtù was originally published in French in 1979. In this English translation (from Dorothy Blair) of the little novella, the author pokes fun at government bureaucrats, at superstition, and at hypocrisy of many sorts. The tone is playful and mocking; and the book is a fun, light read.

But the whole plot hangs on one magical assumption which never really worked for me: throughout, the beggars have significant leverage in that all kinds of powerful people are required by their marabouts to give sacrifices to beggars. So when the beggars go on strike, the people have to come and find them. Yet it doesn't ring true, either in fact or as a plausible suspension of disbelief. While it is entertaining to see long lines of fancy cars pulling up to the home where the beggars have holed up, coughing up the wealthy to make their required offerings, the flight of fancy doesn't feel quite airworthy.

If you come across this book and want to enjoy some mild satire, I recommend it: I encountered it in a little

bookshop in Banjul, the Gambia, and at 99 pages, I figured I had little to lose. But I wouldn't seek it out. It was made into a film (entitled *Bàttu*) in the year 2000, directed by Malian filmmaker Cheick Oumar Sissoko.

If you want satire, I've just started Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* (2006): nothing mild there! And if you want another short but compelling example of Senegalese literature, I recently enjoyed Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1981), which explores the travails of women in Senegal's polygamous society.

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