

Comparing the Themes of Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike* with the Realities of Street-Begging in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: This study explores the thematic parallels between Aminata Sow Fall's "The Beggars' Strike" and the lived realities of street begging in contemporary Nigeria. This is with the use of postcolonial theoretical framework. Begging, as both a socio-economic condition and a religious symbol, reflects deeper systemic inequalities rooted in colonial legacies, institutional decay, and social marginalisation. The research critically analyses the novel's portrayal of beggars as essential yet socially ostracised individuals. Hence, highlighting how their exclusion reveals contradictions in postcolonial moral, political, and religious systems. In parallel, the study reviews scholarly literature on the causes and persistence of begging in Nigeria, focusing on poverty, inadequate education, religious norms, and policy failures. Using textual analysis, the study identifies how Sow Fall's narrative critiques elite hypocrisy and the commodification of suffering, which aligns strongly with Nigeria's own socio-political context. Through the lens of postcolonialism, the paper interrogates power dynamics, systemic neglect, and the constructed "otherness" of beggars. This comparative analysis reveals how literature not only mirrors societal issues but also challenges dominant narratives that perpetuate social exclusion. The study

recommends a multi-dimensional approach to tackling begging in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Street -Begging, Nigeria, religion, socio-economic and policy- failure.*

INTRODUCTION

According to Bukoye (2015), street begging remains a pressing socio-political issue in many postcolonial African societies. Moreover, it is not merely as a symptom of economic hardship but as a manifestation of deeper structural inequities rooted in colonial legacies and contemporary governance failures. Aminata Sow Fall's "The Beggars' Strike" (La Grève des Bâttu, 1979) offers a perfect satire of post-independence Senegalese society. This is a Postcolonial African society where those in power seek to eliminate the visible poor for the sake of urban beautification, only to realise they need the same beggars to validate their spiritual and social legitimacy. This literary work, although fictional, captures a reality still prevalent in Nigerian cities today. This is because the government periodically criminalises street-begging through policies that displace, marginalise, or even detain beggars under the guise of urban order (Adegbite and Olatunde, 2024). This practice reflects a long-standing tension between modern state aesthetics and traditional societal structures, a theme also explored in the context of other cultural forms (Akanbi, 2024)

Drawing on postcolonial theory, this study critically examines how the themes in *The Beggars' Strike* intersect with contemporary issues surrounding street-begging in Nigeria. It investigates the legacy of colonial urban planning, the cultural politics of charity, and the subaltern's voice, or lack thereof in both the literary and real-world contexts. The aim is to explore how Sow Fall's fictional representation of street-begging critiques postcolonial power structures and how those themes reflect and diverge from the realities of beggars in Nigeria. This is with more focus on urban contexts like Lagos, Kano, and Abuja.

Literature Review

Street Begging in Nigeria

In Nigeria, street begging is still a major socioeconomic problem that affects both urban and rural areas. It is a pervasive social issue that is especially noticeable in

marketplaces, street corners, houses of worship, and other public areas, according to Adegbite and Olatunde (2024). Despite being widespread throughout the country, street begging is more prevalent in the north because of institutional and historical considerations. Following to Ojedokun (2021), thousands of people beg on the streets every day. Children, the elderly, and people with disabilities are all included in this. This pervasiveness indicates both personal adversity and institutional shortcomings in tackling social vulnerability.

The Almajiri system, which sends young boys from their homes to Islamic schools and frequently turns to begging as a means of subsistence, is partially to blame for the epidemic in northern Nigeria. In contrast, begging is more frequently linked to community conflict victims, internally displaced people (IDPs), and economic migrants without a formal source of income in southern Nigeria. These geographical differences, according to Ogunkan and Fawole (2009), are a reflection of larger systemic problems like unequal development, shoddy legal systems, and brittle welfare institutions.

The dominant factor contributing to the persistence of street begging in Nigeria is poverty. With a significant proportion of the population living below the poverty line, many individuals lack access to basic necessities such as food, shelter, and healthcare. Bukoye (2015) emphasizes that the rising rate of unemployment, especially among the youth, leaves a large section of the population vulnerable to destitution. For many, begging becomes not a choice but a desperate response to survival in the face of systemic failure.

Urban poverty has increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and other recent financial downturns that have put additional burden on the economy. According to Onagun (2016), the lack of strong social protection laws makes this issue even worse. In the absence of substantial job creation initiatives or state-sponsored welfare programs, people from underprivileged backgrounds have few options. This creates a vicious cycle where poverty leads to begging, which in turn feeds economic marginalisation. Moreover, street begging in Nigeria is normalised and sustained in part by religion and culture. It is considered culturally acceptable and even spiritually significant in some parts of the country, especially in the north, for

children or people with physical disabilities to beg. Oluwole (2016) notes that the Almajiri system, embedded within Islamic educational traditions, inadvertently institutionalizes child begging under the guise of religious training.

Furthermore, both Islam and Christianity encourage almsgiving as a moral obligation. This charitable duty, while noble in intention, can unintentionally sustain a dependent class of beggars. Ojedokun (2015) observes that this religious encouragement of alms creates a pattern in which the act of giving becomes ritualised, but the underlying conditions that produce begging are not addressed. The deep-seated symbiotic relationship between religious practice and societal expression, including acts like almsgiving, is a recurrent feature in African societies, often reflected and critiqued in its literature (Akanbi, 2024). As a result, street begging becomes embedded within the social fabric, reinforced by both religious norms and public sympathy.

Lack of access to high-quality education is one of the main factors keeping Nigeria's street begging cycle going. Poverty, displacement, or institutional negligence have prevented many of the youngsters who scrounge on the streets from receiving a formal education. Poor educational facilities, high dropout rates, and a shortage of qualified teachers in many parts of Nigeria are major factors in the marginalisation of vulnerable people, claims Adebola (2021). Since many people are shut out of official jobs and entrepreneurial prospects due to their lack of reading and numeracy abilities, begging is one of the few practical ways to make ends meet. Addressing this requires a transformative approach to education that moves beyond traditional methods to embrace inclusive and accessible smart learning solutions, a shift that presents significant challenges and opportunities in the Nigerian context (Chukwuemeka, Dominic, Akanbi, & Aregbesola, 2025).

The cycle of poverty and street begging persists when education is either unavailable or unrelated to the lived reality of underprivileged communities, despite the fact that it is frequently hailed as a long-term solution to poverty. In places where parents are unable to pay for school fees, educational supplies, or transportation, the problem is made worse. Because of this, a sizable section of Nigerian youngsters continue to be caught in cycles of economic struggle and illiteracy that span generations. In

Nigeria, institutional and policy shortcomings make begging even more prevalent (Onagun, 2016). There are no well-coordinated national or state-level programs to rehabilitate beggars or keep vulnerable groups from becoming impoverished, and existing rules that forbid loitering or public disturbance are not routinely implemented. Ogunkan and Fawole (2009) argue that without a clearly defined policy framework to address homelessness, mental health, unemployment, and disability, the state's approach to street begging remains largely reactionary.

Another key contributor to street begging is rapid urbanisation and internal displacement. Conflicts, natural disasters, and poor agricultural yields in rural areas have forced many individuals to migrate to urban centres in search of safety and livelihood. However, these urban spaces are often overcrowded, under-resourced, and hostile to informal settlers. As a result, displaced individuals resort to begging to sustain themselves. This pattern is especially evident in states like Lagos, Kano, and Abuja, where high population densities and income inequalities place enormous strain on public infrastructure. Ojedokun (2021) points out that urban migration without corresponding job opportunities leads to a surplus labour force that is absorbed into the informal economy or worse, into exploitative or survivalist practices like begging.

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Theory

An multidisciplinary viewpoint known as postcolonial theory examines the effects of colonialism and imperialism on people, cultures, languages, and societies (Gichki, 2020). The residual effects of colonialism and apartheid in Africa are referred to as postcolonial theory (Mlambo et al., 2023). According to Diko (2024), this theory acknowledges that colonialism's consequences are still influencing modern contexts while taking into account the legacies, complexity, and difficulties that endure in its aftermath. This approach inevitably aims to dismantle the systemic inequalities, cultural biases, and power dynamics that remain after colonial and apartheid rule (Kennedy, 1996, p. 345). This theory challenges Eurocentric ideologies in discussions about Africa and examines how colonialism affected language, identity, culture, and literature.

Postcolonial theory provides a useful lens for reading this text. According to Odijie (2023), Fanon argued that ex-colonial powers would use their existing positions to preserve and even to reinforce their colonialist trade channels. So, the post-independence African elites replicate colonial structures to maintain their authority, often at the expense of the masses. Bhabha's (1994) notion of mimicry is also relevant, as Sow Fall critiques how African leaders mimic colonial urban models that exclude the poor. Therefore, postcolonial theory examines the lingering effects of colonialism in former colonies. This is with special focus on how social hierarchies, language, and urban structures maintain systems of oppression. In *The Beggars' Strike*, the beggars occupy a subaltern position. However, the novel resists their erasure by making them central to the plot.

Synopsis of *The Beggars' Strike*

The novel's premise revolves around the government's plan to remove beggars from the streets of an unidentified city in order to boost tourism. The Department of Public Health and Hygiene's director, Mour Ndiaye, and his assistant, Keba Dabo, are in charge of the assignment. "You realise 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," was the directive from above (p.1). Some of these beggars are involved in a variety of mishaps, both minor and major, while the streets are being cleared of them. One notable victim of the raids is Madiabel, a disabled beggar who was knocked down by his fellow beggars. Unfortunately, the government has not provided for the relocation of these beggars to a rehabilitation camp in order to provide for their needs. All they're doing is being taken to the countryside to suffer. "But tell me, Keba, just answer one question, how they would live if they didn't beg!" a reasonable voice asks Keba as the clearing goes on. Tell me, too, to whom people would give charity, as religion requires us to offer alms to someone. (page 2). As fate would have it, Mour Ndiaye decides to speak with his spiritualist Mallam after growing interested in the position of vice president of the country. He is informed that "...You shall have your wish, if it so pleases God. All you have to do is to sacrifice a finewhite ram. You will slaughter it with your own hand... and distribute them to beggars" (p.12). Since he has instructed his men to remove all of

the beggars from the streets, Mour is in a difficult situation. From their point of view, he suddenly realises that the beggars he had pushed away control his destiny. Mour decides that in order to become vice president, he must make the ultimate sacrifice for the beggars. Therefore, he gathers his men to help him find the beggars. The search teams' attempts to find the beggars in the city were unsuccessful. Later, the search is shifted to rural areas outside of the city. Mour discovers the beggars in the custody of their lessee, Salla Niang, in a secluded village. Salla resolves to have a pound of flesh from Mour after recognising him as the director of the department that ordered their expulsion from the streets as he enters the compound. Mour recounts his ordeal, saying, "I have a very, very, vital sacrifice to make, which is why I am visiting these regions. I'm going to make the offer to you. In order to give the beggars their sacrifice, Mour tells them to return to the streets, but he receives the following response: "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" (p.69). Mour is left bewildered and without an explanation. He now understands that the beggars currently hold the power. To no use, he bargains with the beggars. Even when he gives them money, they still don't show up. As a result, he eventually lost the position he was seeking.

Comparing the Themes of Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike* with Contemporary Street-Begging in Nigeria

Urban "Sanitisation" and the Area of Colonial Modernity

Aminata Sow Fall opens her satire with a policy that is familiar to any observer of African post-independence urban policy represented in bold with researcher's emphasis:

"This morning there has been another article about it in the newspaper: about how the streets are congested with these beggars, these talibés, 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 you without provocation at all times" (Sow Fall, 1981, p. 1).

Mour Ndiaye, the public-works director, mouths the rhetoric of progress, conflating cleanliness with civilisation in a move that Homi Bhabha would label mimicry (Bhabha, 1994). Nigerian officials have deployed identical language. On 9 July, the Federal Capital Territory Administration (FCTA) launched an initiative, Operation Sweep Abuja, to rid the city of street begging, scavenging, and other related activities deemed a public nuisance (Premium Times, 2025). Therefore, in both literary and real, the colonial city haunts the present, dictating aesthetic ideals that privilege sanitised individuals over human dignity.

Additionally, Ndiaye's obsession with "unsightly" bodies parallels Lagos State's Section 157(1) of the Criminal Law of 2015, which criminalises loitering with intent to solicit alms in the central business district. Meanwhile, this is a statute that displaces, rather than rehabilitates, thousands of destitute residents. The law's silent premise that development requires the erasure of visible poverty finds its satirical counterpart in Sow Fall's narrative, where "*the beggars are an obstacle to the hygiene of the City*" (p. 17). Yet Sow Fall undercuts Ndiaye's modernist fantasy by exposing its dependence on the very bodies it wishes to erase. The city's beauty proves superficial once the beggars' absence renders his ritual charity impossible. Consequently, the elite discover that their moral economy, grounded in the Islamic ethic of *sadaqa*, collapses without visible recipients. Therefore, postcolonial modernity, is shown to be an imported system that cannot fully accommodate indigenous ethical logics.

Charity and the Religious Economy of Alms

One of the novel's most critical ironies lies in Ndiaye's desperate search for beggars to secure the position of the Vice president:

"Yes... yes. But Keba, I must tell you beggars today. I need them... I've got to distribute a I need these sacrifice among them. I need them to go back to their vantage points for one day, for one day only ... It won't even be for one day, only for a few hours!" Keba, completely nonplussed, slightly loosened his tie to give himself time to think, he felt himself growing hot all over and his head began to swim. He had difficulty in getting his breath. In a timid, almost inaudible voice, he asked Mour,

'You want the beggars back in the City?... Is that what you're saying?' "Yes, for a very personal reason... I'd like you to go to see them with a few members of the former clearance squads to give them confidence and to persuade them to come back on the streets for a few hours. Tell them they risk nothing, absolutely nothing!" (p. 72). Charity becomes a transactional ritual, its spiritual efficacy contingent on a visible exchange. Sow Fall thereby satirises a religious economy in which the poor function as sacrificial intermediaries, granting the elite access to divine grace. This critique of the performative and often hypocritical nature of religious piety aligns with the tradition of using literary comedy and satire as powerful tools for social criticism, exposing the gaps between professed beliefs and actual practices (Akanbi, 2025a). In Nigeria, Ramadan and Christmas transform urban intersections into theatres of calculated piety; research in Nigeria shows almsgiving nearly triples during the last ten days of Ramadan (Daily Trust, 2025). However, this reduces afterward.

Frantz Fanon warns that colonial religion mostly functions as a discouraging systemic change by sacralising suffering (Fanon, 1961). Sow Fall advances this critique through satire: the beggars' strike upends the moral exchange, exposing how the powerful instrumentalise both faith and poverty. This use of narrative as a tool for sociopolitical critique is not unique to literature; it finds a potent parallel in Nigerian musical traditions. For instance, the Fújì music of Sikiru Ayinde Barrister has been rigorously analyzed for its role as a vehicle for sociopolitical activism and commentary on current affairs and democracy (Akanbi, 2025c]), demonstrating how popular art forms across genres serve to challenge power and give voice to public dissent. Nigerian comparison is equally obvious. Politicians distribute rice and cash to beggars during election campaigns, only to endorse anti-begging raids months later. Hence, the beggars are between coveted object of charity and unwanted urban detritus. Hence, revealing how postcolonial states reproduce the colonial economy of extraction, both spiritual as well as material.

Gendered Marginality and the Politics of Care

While "The Beggars' Strike" features a mixed group, the narrative grants particular prominence to Salla Niang, whose authority unsettles patriarchal assumptions. "*Who*

is the master of this house?' Only now does Salla Niang raise her eyes to look at the visitor. What do you want?' I'd like to speak to the master of the house." I'm in charge here" (p. 81). Her leadership foregrounds how gender intersects with poverty. This is a theme that aligns powerfully in Nigeria, where the feminisation of begging has accelerated. Surveys reveals that in northeastern Nigeria, the decade-long conflict between the armed group Boko Haram and the Nigerian government has displaced an estimated 2.5 million people, of whom at least 79% are women and girls (Diaspora Africa, 2025). Additionally, many are supporting children or disabled relatives.

Postcolonial feminism alerts on the risk of equating women's suffering with victimhood alone. Sow Fall avoids this pitfall by portraying Mame Faye as strategist and nurturer. She organises food distribution among strikers and articulates the strike's moral logic to Mour Ndiaye. This exact portrayal challenges simplistic gendered stereotypes, a rethinking that is equally crucial in contemporary analyses of representation within cultural industries like Nigerian dramaturgy (Akanbi, 2025b). Yet Nigerian realities complicate this empowerment narrative. Patriarchal structures and state repression limit women beggars' capacity to mobilise in Nigeria. Therefore, while Sow Fall's novel is toward a feminist postcolonial position, this is unrealised in Nigerian currently.

Conclusion:

Through a postcolonial lens, "The Beggars' Strike" can be read as a radical reimagining of the beggar not as a passive recipient but as an agent of socio-political disruption. Sow Fall's narrative speaks to the continued marginalisation of the poor in African cities like those in Nigeria, where government policies reflect colonial patterns of exclusion. Sow Fall's "The Beggars' Strike" and Nigeria's street-begging crisis converge in their exposure of postcolonial power's dependency on the poor it disapproves. The novel dramatises how urban beautification, religious charity, and bureaucratic rationality intertwine to model visibility. Its beggars, however, refuse passive roles, designing a collective strategy that re-inscribes them into the moral and spatial order. Their strike models a subaltern position that Nigerian beggars have not achieved, hindered by gendered constraints, state violence, and fragmented

organisation. Reading the Nigerian situation through Sow Fall's satire and postcolonial theory reveals that any lasting solution must move beyond punitive laws or seasonal charity. It requires dismantling colonial urban hierarchies, embedding social protection within participatory governance, and recognising beggars as citizens with the right to shape city space. Literature, then, becomes not only a mirror but a map that shows both how far we have come and how far we must still go.

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