

BOOK REVIEW

La Greve des Battu. Aminata Sow Fall. Dakar, Abidjan, and Lomé: N.E.A., 1980.

Begging may be a necessity for some, or a dishonest way of making a living, for others. Justified or not, begging is, nevertheless, a universal act. Attitudes toward begging, however, are not. In the Muslim-oriented country of Senegal, for example, giving to the poor is not only encouraged by the religion, but failure to do so often demonstrates a lack of faith. At the same time, the donor experiences a sense of cleanliness and fulfillment by the act of giving.

The Senegalese writer Aminata Sow Fall captures that spiritual, interdependent exchange in her sociological novel, *La Grève des Battu* (The Strike of the Beggars). Except, there is one major obstacle--the government. Her central character, Mour Ndiaye, is a politician who has been given the task of unburdening the city and its population of its embarrassing, despicable, and far too conspicuous elements--namely, the beggars. These otherwise harmless creatures, ranging in all sizes, shapes, and deformities, have no other means of support than what scraps and coins they are able to scrounge up in the streets. Yet, as their numbers increase, the country's economic gains reaped by developing Western tourism will necessarily decrease. There is but one solution--to drive the Battus out of the city. Thanks to his trustworthy and all-to-willing assistant, Keba Dabo, Mour Ndiaye soon has this problem eliminated.

Ironically, the invisible poor come back to haunt him. The strict conditions set forth by a highly esteemed marabout stipulate that Mour fulfill a specific religious obligation for further political success. He must give to the town beggars in their natural habitat.

Mour Ndiaye is a man who outwardly conforms to the image of a proud modern-day African leader. Unfortunately, he lacks the proper political experience and command of the official language of the country to move up the political ladder. It is no secret that his assistant has achieved most of his objectives for him. In reality, he has no faith in himself in what concerns his ability to control his own destiny. Torn between changing times and deeply-rooted religious tradition and practice, he places his entire fate in the hands of Allah and marabouts--the Muslim priests.

The roles are thus reversed. Power changes hands. The

once proud Ndiaye pleads with the now enlightened beggars to return to their former posts in town for just a few hours so that he can be relieved of his mission. His bout with the beggars brings about his own humiliating defeat and decline.

Aminata Fall Sow's theme of dignity is interlaced with the popular controversial themes of polygamy, the women's liberation movement, and the generation gap, all of which stem from the widening chasm between tradition and Western ideologies.

Polygamy and women's liberation are often two sides of the same problem. Mour Ndiaye's wife, for example, after years of obedience, speaks out against her stunned husband when the latter decides to take on a second wife. Traditional societal and peer pressures, however, force her to submit in order to avoid the shameful consequences. Tradition has become too much a part of her life for her to change now.

The feisty, young second wife does assert herself and demands more consideration from her husband. Having been exposed to the Western culture, she wears lipstick, tightly-fitted pants, and smokes. She also works full-time as a secretary. But, in spite of this Western influence, she still has not totally rejected her sense of culture and religious tradition; for, she has accepted polygamy. She is the living contradiction of the two ideological poles.

Meanwhile, the rebellious daughter, clearly more mature than her ten years, refuses to submit to hypocrisy and superstitions embedded in traditional values. She believes strongly that her mother should assert herself and accept no compromise. She never forgives the abuse her father has inflicted on her mother by taking on a second wife. She is the prototype of the emerging African feminist. She has a strong awareness of and faith in her own person. She incarnates the modern woman.

Certain scenes are reminiscent of *Xala* by Ousmane Sembene, especially the visual scenes rendered by the movie. We see, for example, the calm, grin-and-bear-it, traditional-mannered wife swallow her pride and anger to keep the peace and dignity in the family. Also, as in *La Grève*, the younger second wife dresses and conducts herself in a more modern fashion. Similarly, both accounts depict wasteful politicians throwing away money on lavish gifts, contrasted with the severely handicapped and penniless beggars. Later, they literally spit on the shameless politician's back in *Xala*, though only figuratively in *La Grève*.

Regretfully, *La Grève des Bâttu* is also reminiscent of reality. Although no geographical names were mentioned, there have been legal disciplinary measures in Senegal, though less violent, to rid the city's major tourist attractions of these

"unaesthetic creatures." The novel is thus based on true political incidents. Throughout the scenario, Ms. Fall underlines the flagrantly misplaced values and priorities--the privileged few with political connections over the masses, the European tourists' comfort over the needs of the country's own poor, the short-term economic remedies over long-term religious and inevitable political consequences. A country that maintains such an inhumane position toward its own people and refuses to seek a suitable solution to their suffering is inviting its own doom.

It is writers such as Ms. Fall whose poignant writing style, naturalistic dialogues and settings, and in-depth character treatment succeed in increasing our awareness of such injustices.

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