

ARTICLE

## **Beggars but not Women: False Premises and Strategies of Resistance in Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike***

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### SUMMARY

This paper analyzes the representation of two subaltern figures, the beggar and the woman, in Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike*. It argues that, contrary to what the title leads us to imagine, the novel does not foreground the strike as a means for the beggars' struggle against subalternity but rather denounces a series of false premises in post-coloniality that renders the strike ineffective. By staging women challenging heteronormative practices in the same way as beggars strike to resist exclusion, the novel draws attention to different strategies of resistances. I demonstrate that, where the beggars' resistance paradoxically excludes them, one woman's affirmative sabotage of the institutions that oppress her ultimately prevents her from falling into the same paradox. I conclude by arguing that the power of the novel resides in its invitation to ask what happens when citizens do not question the premises they are too easily asked to choose from.<sup>1</sup>

**KEYWORDS:** Postcolonialism, heteronormativity, gender, patriarchy, poverty, strike, resistance, subalternity, class-consciousness

In an interview published in January 2018, Senegalese writer Aminata Sow Fall recalls that when she brought the manuscript of *The Beggar's Strike* to her editor, he responded: "Aminata, a beggars' strike, the Westerners will never understand."<sup>2</sup> She ventured to say that, perhaps, because beggars embody everything that modern society rejects, a beggars' strike would mean an absence of beggars and might appeal to Western readers. The manuscript was eventually published, and it is that very book that made Aminata Sow Fall one of the most celebrated Senegalese writers today.

Though one might undoubtedly question the centrality of the Western reader in that conversation, this article focuses on what seems to be a paradox: the centrality of the beggar as a figure of change and modernity – especially the pivotal role of the female beggar, represented by Salla Niang. Beggars are generally considered to be the antonyms of both change and modernity. They do not convey an idea of change but rather an image of what has not – or has to be – changed. Indeed, they are usually viewed not as being needed for anything but rather as needing everything. It is those presuppositions that put the Senegalese society of petty bourgeois Mour Ndiaye and Kéba Dabo on hold. With an imaginative account of an improbable situation – no one has ever seen a beggars' strike – I argue that Aminata Sow Fall's text invites us to question this paradox in two distinct ways. First, how can challenging an institutional discourse on gender practices, as do Salla Niang and Sagar Diouf, open an instance of momentary modernization where the beggars' strike not only draws attention to postcolonial double binds but also to the agency of the subaltern women? Second, how do the imagined resources that the beggars set up as a strategy of resistance

appear both to foreground their agency at the center of a society where they are expected to remain silent and to displace them away from the center of a city where their agency is critical?

Both beggars and women are depicted as underprivileged and silenced subjects reacting to the modernization of a society that excludes them. But though the novel seems to focus on the strike as the solution to the beggars' misfortune, the ending is remarkably inconclusive about their fate. On the one hand, in the society that Aminata Sow Fall describes, the beggars' strike shows a discrepancy in ownership of discursive power among women: not all women can operate with the same agency. By foregrounding the choices made by some women, I argue that the novel invites us to think not so much about the reaction of the beggars or the outcome of their strike, as the title of the novel indicates, but rather about the critical stance that citizens – women, peasants, indigenous subjects, etc. – should adopt towards preconceived premises or false choices in order to avoid falling into double binds. I seek to expose, therefore, the critical discourse of domestic power relations that the novel's female characters make concurrently with the beggars' strike. On the other hand, we do not know whether the beggars will return to the city. If they do, even with the assurance that they will no longer be mistreated, their success implies the return to their position as beggars. If they do not, their success entails the collapse of one of the pillars of Islam – the religion of most beggars in the novel and the majority of Senegalese citizens. I thus focus on the beggars' demands and their strategies of resistance that bring to the fore an unsolvable dilemma.

This article thus tracks the ways in which the paradox embraced by the figure of the beggar, i.e., his role as agent of change in modernity, embodies some of the most pivotal issues faced by postcolonial countries after independence. It analyzes how women, who have been continuously written out of a modernity narrative and further moved into subalternity, challenge the place of tradition within the wave of modernization and call for an awareness that *The Beggar's Strike* is also the stage of social, economic, and political double binds inherent to postcolonial nation-states.

While many articles have opposed Aminata Sow Fall's imaginary account of a beggars' strike to Sembène Ousmane's fictional rendering of the railway workers' strike of 1947–48 in *God's Bits of Wood*, noticing the primary role of women in both accounts, they have emphasized that where Sembène offers a Marxist interpretation of the historical event in colonial West Africa, Sow Fall focuses on a feminist critique of postcolonial gender practices. Ultimately, if it is possible to offer a feminist or Marxist reading of *The Beggars' Strike*, this article seeks to understand how the text enables such critique or interpretation. It argues that it is the novel's literary unverifiability rather than its historical veridicality that, perhaps, offers the readers an imaginative moment to work within the contradictions brought by modernization and subalternization.

### **Challenging Gender Practices**

The paradox of the beggars' situation is only matched by a similar paradoxical role and position of women around the strike. Not unlike the beggars, the female characters in the text find themselves in positions that make the reader question their place, role, and visibility in a changing postcolonial society. Should they question the decision of male figures with whom they interact? Should polygamy be abolished as a practice of the past? How can they use institutions that have excluded them to gain access to circuits of agency and class mobility?

Though we must notice that, as we reach the end of the novel, the issue of the strike remains unknown and the status of the beggars remains largely unchanged, I argue that the *The Beggars' Strike* is the story of a change that alters that society in a radical way: through the beggars' strike, women have become an unavoidable force in the entire social, political, and religious structure of the modern postcolonial state. In a sense, the women, just like the beggars, do not make any demands, but their (re)actions bring an impossible dilemma that itself asks us to question the given premise: with no possibility to know who wins or who loses on the count of met demands that are never formulated, the issue is not about what has changed but how are changes made. To that end, readers follow the women's voices and actions as signals for, perhaps, a challenge in gender practices. Throughout the novel, a *leitmotif* runs with a quasi-metronomic regularity: "Times have changed." Its meaning, however, not only varies in accordance with the subject-position of each woman, it also begs the question: "What does that change mean for me?"

From the vantage point of Mour Ndiaye's "human decluttering" directive, the question certainly has major repercussions for each male beggar: Gorgui Diop, Nguirare Sarr, Madiabel. In the second part of this essay, I show that the repercussions are also structurally different from the only female (and former) beggar, Salla Niang. But through Mour's directives, there is a female character whose life is affected differently and unexpectedly: his wife, Lolli. In the text, immediately preceding her first appearance, we learn that Mour is secretly hoping that his directive, if successful, will bring him "a beautiful promotion" (15).<sup>3</sup> In the West African context into which Aminata Sow Fall inserts her novel, it would be unthinkable to leave such fate to the outcome of man's enterprise alone. Touched by divine grace but quasi-untouched by the vicissitudes of time, at the crossroads between African and Islamic traditions, the marabout is the unavoidable supplement to modern life. Inserting herself in that supplement, Lolli, "as a devoted spouse concerned about her husband's future," decides to intervene and reaches out to the family's devoted marabout, Serigne Birama. What will the change mean for her? "She saw herself as the wife of the vice-president of the republic," writes Aminata Sow Fall. "Ahead of the ministers' wives, before the ministers even!" (52) Lolli hardly conceals all the privileges that she, as Mour Ndiaye's wife, would be granted, none of which related to her already privileged financial status. "Of course, at the financial level, very little would change. Had she not all she could dream of?" (53). A list follows the rhetorical question: gold, pearls, and "three villas that Mour registered in her name." If times have changed in the postcolonial nation-state Mour is a dignitary of, the status of women is eerily that of her husband. Her voice can only be heard and institutionally-validated if it is also her husband's. With no social mobility of her own, she is in a subaltern position.

Paradoxically, Salla Niang, whose position as a (former) beggar rests outside of a socio-political system of institutional validation and thus lacks access to upward social mobility, is not a subaltern. Salla's identity derives not only from her voice as leader of the beggars (whom she is the first to encourage to strike) but also from a relation to her husband (which resonates with feminist positions). In the climatic finale of the novel, when Mour demands to speak with the "householder" and not the "strike's leader," it is Salla Niang who responds: "Here I am" (140). In addition to the focus on patriarchal dominance that has often been described as a failure of postcolonial modernization, I argue that it is Mour's inability to see Salla as having broken from patriarchy and heteronormativity that marks the beginning of his downfall. Salla has learned to tame the capitalist modernization in a postcolonial economy: she became a small bourgeois capitalist – a position hitherto occupied by male figures. Though her voice as a wife is often silenced by the very male beggars she leads in matters of strike or economic survival ("Get back

to your cooking,” says one of the beggars; “In her marriage, she wears the pants!” [28] chuckles another), she has freed herself from heteronormative practices through economic independence. Lolli, on the contrary, has remained the prisoner of a generational patriarchy, echoed in her mother’s advice: “Obey your husband, do not seek anything other than his happiness, because yours, and even more so that of your children, depends on his” (54). It is in the contrast between Salla, a wife whose husband is often mocked for obeying his wife (29), and Lolli, an obedient wife who only echoes the words of “what Mour Ndiaye used to say” (18), that Aminata Sow Fall weaves the beggars’ success and failure.

But another parameter might push Lolli to ask herself what such change means for her. In her second appearance in the novel, Lolli faces yet another challenge to her subject-position when Mour announces to her in the middle of the night that he “has been given a second wife” (57). Lolli’s reaction, “having lost all control,” exactly the opposite of her mother’s advice, is fueled by one thought: “Times have changed.” Still, it is not her voice that we hear thinking but the narrator’s: “In different times, yes, she could have been able to withstand the shock, she would have swallowed it with indifference, but today, *times have changed*” (59, italics added). As it were, it is her daughter, Raabi, a law student, who introduced her to a different way of thinking. “Polygamy should be abolished; it is a practice no longer fitted to today’s world.” Mour’s words describing his future second wife (“a fresh young girl of seventeen years old [. . .] met in a hotel in a neighboring country” [62]) are indeed at odds with the image of the modern postcolonial nation-state he wishes to promote. But there is, also, an equally odd practicality to which polygamy constitutes a means to an end favorable to Lolli: Mour’s career advancement. “He had been seduced by [the young girl’s] spontaneity, her youth, and *especially by the ease with which she spoke the official language, and with which Mour still had some difficulty*” (63, italics added). Mour’s lack of fluency in what is presumably the French language – an official language in most West African countries – indeed puts at risk Lolli’s investment throughout the years: “Where were you? Who was working?” Lolli asks rhetorically. “Who was looking for marabouts? Tell me, where did the money, that my father and brothers gave me out of pity, go? In the pockets of marabouts, to open for you the doors to prosperity” (61). Mour’s inability to speak the former colonizer’s language puts in jeopardy not only his career but also her years of work behind the scenes. Indeed, the road to the ambitious long-term goal of the family, the vice-presidency, is paved with the competition with other pretenders to the position who quickly target his language deficiency: “He is not even capable of speaking the official language of our Nation, how could he assume the function [of vice-president]?” asks rhetorically a cabinet member who, we are told, has “started an open war against Mour” (98).

Caught in a double-bind between her dignity as a woman feeling humiliated by the practice of polygamy and the honor that comes with the family’s ambitious goal that a second wife would help achieve, Lolli cannot choose. Nor can anyone help her choose. All the advice and information she receives from her mother, her daughter, and her female friends, seem inadequate to her dilemma. Public and private lives are intertwined, intergenerational gendered structures of responsibility collide, and reproductive heteronormativity rules the day (Ward and Schneider 433). Indeed, Lolli is caught between two discourses: “If Mour abandons you, you will be covered in shame; with eight children, only a few in age to marry, one cannot act like a little girl” (64), says her father; “The elders yielded to pressure [. . .] [they] cannot understand the world of today” (65), says her daughter. The solution cannot be a choice; it will be a negotiation. Sine, the second wife, can have her husband, but Lolli will remain the sole maker of Mour’s fate. “Sine, the second wife,

is still pampered and financially fulfilled; but it is Lolli who is the sole agent of all the maraboutic secrets of Mour” (100). With this statement comes the last appearance of Lolli Ndiaye in the text.

Almost diametrically opposed to the institutional heteronormativity between Mour and Lolli Ndiaye is the challenging relationship between Kéba Dabo and Sagar Diouf. Unmarried to, yet intimate with each other, their relationship is double-bound. They make their textual entrance in a scene that parodies the interaction of a couple who has lived together for a long time: “She was tired of hearing him speak about ‘those who poison the odor of the city.’ It had become his only conversation topic” (34). At first glance, heteronormativity outside of the institution of marriage seems to shadow the relation. Comparing Sagar to his unnamed wife, Kéba laments: “Women are only interested in superficial things [. . .] nice outfits, grand ceremonies, futilities” (36). At the same time, his position signals a tension in heteronormativity and its reproduction. Yes, women can think critically: “It is only a question of education.” No, they do not because “Certain men do not like strong women; those who have no questions and ask nothing, that is what those proud men who play with their wives as if they were dolls need” (37). He himself is not immune to such thinking, and comments on Sagar being indeed “beautiful like a doll” (38). But stepping in a space where only men usually step in the patriarchal society that Aminata Sow Fall describes, Sagar openly questions the novel’s argument: “Tell me, Kéba, I only ask you one thing: how would the beggars live if they did not beg? Tell me this: to whom would people give alms, as we must, since religion prescribes it?” The subject-position of Lolli and Sagar seem not different: they both take orders from the man they work for; they both work behind the scenes; they both voice what they see as a contradiction. But more interesting than the similarities are the differences.

Perhaps because of the impossibility to be heard through the husband who abandoned her, Sagar engages neither in resistance nor submission to male authority. Rather, she affirmatively sabotages the patriarchal gender hierarchy within which she operates. If we say yes to the text and accept the testimonies the text gives about how difficult it is for a woman to be upwardly and socially mobile in a heteronormative postcolonial society, one must recognize the presumably bigger obstacles faced by a single woman such as Sagar. Under those conditions, the character stands for an idiosyncratic position that deserves more attention than it has hitherto been given. Unlike Lolli, whose life is socially tied to her husband, Sagar acts without worrying about consequences on her social status. Her relation to Kéba, apparently professional, suggests an intimate liaison quasi-undisclosed throughout the novel. Though Kéba is married, he has invited Sagar for the weekend to a hotel described as a “true earthly paradise” (82). Their conversations are often intensely personal – as shown by Kéba confiding in her the painful story of his childhood. Presented as his personal and professional partner, Sagar seems to enjoy a marriage-like relationship to Kéba without the drawback of polygamy and its practice from which Lolli suffers. She is not caught in the Cornelian dilemma between love and work, experienced by Lolli – or Raabi. In the professional side of her life, Sagar often oversteps her role as simple secretary and offers her boss advice on what she thinks he should do: “Do you want me to tell you what I think, Kéba? You cannot live above your time and society” (131). When the leitmotiv “Times have changed” appears in Sagar’s voice, it stands neither for a way of becoming modern nor for an opposition to a traditional way of life. It calls for a working from within institutional power, here the government, with the intention to take advantage of it:

- I am convinced that what Mr. Ndiaye is asking for has to do with the coming nomination of a vice-president. [. . .] So it is better to be in ‘dialogue’ with him. [. . .] And he will not

forget you when he will be nominated. [. . .] You see that what I had told you about the beggars was true! [. . .] so why not take advantage of it?

- Take advantage of what?

- Well, if I were you, I would capitalize on my intervention. [. . .] That's life. One must seize opportunities. [. . .] Without looking like you charge him for the favor he is asking you for, tell him you would like a bigger house. (132)

Though Kéba almost physically reacts against the idea of abusing the institutions he works for, Sagar's strategy is ultimately not for her personal gain but for others. Where Lolli saw the advancement of Mour's position within society as an opportunity to further her own status and become more powerful than other women, Sagar seems only concerned with Kéba's position. If she is to gain anything from her boss's advancement, the success is about the one she cares about: "Be sure that if [Mour] is named Vice-President of the Republic, you will be a Minister! I wish nothing better for you! For it is you who has done all the work!" (82).

The ethics of a disinterested thinking of others marks a singular difference between Sagar and other female characters of the novel – including Lolli and Raabi. Not even Salla Niang, who leads the resistance among the beggars that ultimately brings them some level of class-consciousness, offers an image of a selfless actor in an otherwise self-centered vindication of rights and dignity.

### Strategies of Resistance

Resistance is always exercised against something or someone. It implies that agents of resistance are recognized by institutions that can validate their gesture against whatever it is they are resisting. But what is it to resist when the agents of resistance, or their means of resistance, are not institutionally validated? What form can resistance take when its agents do not have agency? The powerful subject of *The Beggars' Strike* is the imagination of the means and strategies of resistance formed by a subaltern group, that is to say, institutionally unrecognized: the beggars. The figure of the beggar, uninserted into a capitalist bourgeois narrative brought by colonization, remains the wreck of a failed project of modernization – here understood as a widespread and systematic assault on the ways of life of those who do not fit the one-size-fits-all model of the "developed," i.e., those inserted into globalized circuits of capital. In a world where competition drives countries' social and economic policies, failure to appear as "developed" – a concept exacerbated in countries often hailed as "developing" – often induces a specific discourse about those (beggars, prostitutes, immigrants, criminals, etc.) who jeopardize the marketable image of a modern, prosperous, bourgeois nation: we have tried everything. Against the "we" that includes all those to whom modernity has supposedly improved life or helped climb the socio-political ladder, there exists a "they" that stands for the radical other who, allegedly, cannot or does not want to change.

In *The Beggars' Strike*, "they" are the beggars who are both the remnants and the evidence of the failed project of modernization. The postcolonial state in which they live, represented by its most zealous agents, Mour Ndiaye and Kéba Dabo, has defined them as a "problem." Yet, since it is their removal that will show evidence of a modern success, modernization is here a metonym

for “problem-erasing” rather than “problem-solving.” Singularly, the beggars, subaltern subjects who yet operate in or within the vicinity of the city’s most visible institutions, are exclusively male; the only female who is no longer a beggar, Salla Niang, has moved to the less visible periphery. Indeed, through an inner reflection of Kéba Dabo, we read in the very first page of the novel that beggars impede the effective operation of traffic at the center of the city: access to the workplace, the hospital, the bank, the market – all markers of a modern or modernized metropolis.

The first scene of *The Beggars’ Strike* starts not with the radical idea that beggars must disappear from public view to make room for a modern city ready to welcome tourists’ money, but rather with the assessment that the government has failed to intervene in an efficient manner. Apparently, it is not even the first time that Kéba Dabo has to return to his public service mission: “To proceed with human decluttering.” Mour Ndiaye, his direct superior and the director of the government’s “Public Health Services” – of which we do not know much about – insists that, regardless of previous actions, “The situation has become more and more worrisome.” Diametrically opposed to that scene, the beggars are presented for the first time just a few pages later as a group playing a lottery, organized by Salla Niang, a gritty woman who navigates what can be called a beggar’s economy. In fact, contrary to the capitalist market of a bourgeois economy where competition allegedly drives the price through the law of supply and demand, she is “the only buyer” of the products the beggars bring to her hospice. Their commerce is her marketplace – she buys their merchandise “thirty percent below price market” and resells it at the adjacent grocery shop run by her husband. Her task, however, is not to provide for the beggars or to “lift them up.” It is not either to insert them into the capitalist circuit. It is to benefit from their market. Undoubtedly, she is liable to both the government’s actions against the beggars and the future effects of the beggars’ strike. I argue that it is her economic position, more than her gender status, that frames her leading role. To survive economically, she must produce a discourse of resistance that operates in a liminal space between the world of the beggars and the world of the bourgeois. On the one hand, Salla Niang is the private owner of a hospice that she bought when she was a beggar with the money she obtained from her past begging, and where she welcomes all beggars. On the other, she is not quite the prototype of an upper-class mobile subject who successfully left subalternity to become a self-selected entrepreneur. Like other beggars, she has faced the police sent by Mour Ndiaye and Kéba Dabo but resisted arrest by rearranging her physical appearance to look like a mother caring for her child. The use of the mother as quintessential female figure is not, however, Salla Niang’s strategy of resistance. As I showed in the first half of this essay, no female character of the novel belongs to one generic gendered trait they can use to be recognized or have their discourse institutionally-validated. I argue that it is indeed in the refusal of women who take a step towards non-compliance with the false premises they are given (polygamy for Lolli, choice between career or family for Raabi and Sagar) that the novel offers its most powerful, if implicit, critique. As the beggars gather in Salla Niang’s courtyard to converse about their experiences of the recent violent crackdown on their daily alms-receiving trip all over the city, different responses pour. Nguirane Sarr, a middle-aged, blind, and tie-wearing distinguished beggar, responds with an intuitive gut-feeling and calls for no less than a war. Gorgui Diop, an old and witty beggar “very well-known throughout the city,” represents the voice “of reason and wisdom” and calls for patience, endurance, and understanding. “Let us organize,” adds the distinguished Nguirane Sarr. But how do beggars organize?

In a scene that recalls Etienne Lantier’s call for the miners to form a union and strike in Zola’s *Germinal*, the distinguished beggar invites his brothers and sisters to consider themselves

not as victims but as agents of change. It is not they who need the rich, but the rich who need them. “They need to give charity because they need our prayers. [. . .] (I)t is not kindness that makes them give, but their self-preservation instinct.” But Nguirane Sarr’s harangue, like Etienne Lantier’s, is met by a deafening silence: “Silence has suddenly filled the atmosphere” writes Aminata Sow Fall. “A profound silence fell from the starry sky” (318) wrote Emile Zola. In *Germinal*, Etienne Lantier wins back his audience by using the language of capital: “Wage labor is a new form of slavery” (320). In *The Beggars’ Strike*, it is Salla Niang who speaks to the beggars with a similar vocabulary: “Yes, let us organize ourselves!” she says, repeating Nguirane Sarr’s words, proceeding to tell them *how* they will organize. They shall refuse “small white and light coins,” for inflation has decreased their exchange-value: “[They] can’t even be used to buy a candy, a very small candy.” They shall henceforth “stay here.” In a quasi-Marxian gesture, she urges the beggars to resist by behaving not as victims of capital but as agents of production, for it is precisely their role as givers (of prayers, graces, etc.) and receivers (of alms, gifts, etc.) that supports the very system that aims to displace them. But can the beggars afford such radical strategy of resistance?

As is well-known, a strike that prevents the flow of wealth in either direction – salary for the worker, surplus-value for the capitalist – can only last as long as the monetary reserves of one of the parties. Ultimately, negotiations occur when one party can no longer sustain the financial wrestling match – i.e., when the worker can no longer live without the capitalist’s distribution of their salaries, when the capitalist’s business can no longer function without the workers’ production of surplus value. Aminata Sow Fall’s fictional strike thus begs the delicate question: what surplus-value can possibly be created by the beggars? For the beggars’ action to be called a strike in the Marxian sense, begging needs to be wage-labor, surplus-value needs to be produced. Here, almost excerpted from Marx’s *Capital*, Aminata Sow Fall recodes the beggars’ exchange value away from any quantifiable profit – for beggars are the antonym of monetary contribution – into a “form of appearance” (Marx 132) – a content-less form that reveals a double bind between Islamic West African traditions and Western modernization. Indeed, what the beggars produce cannot in any way be quantified but responds to an unquantifiable necessity tied to an Islamic practice that preceded both post-independence modernization and pre-colonial Christianization. Because the strike, as strategy of resistance, foregrounds a site of conflict between Western modernization and Islamic West African traditions, the scene moves as far away as possible from the center of the former (the city) without moving either towards the latter (the countryside), towards Salla Niang’s suburban property. The beggars’ new space is then, literally, nowhere. How did this impasse arise?

Salla Niang’s exhortation to stay in the rural periphery and refuse charity is informed by an acute observation about her former boss, Galaye, dating back to her time before mendicity when she was employed as a maid. Perhaps not incidentally, we learn that Galaye was a union leader fighting for the rights of workers in a metal joinery led by a capitalist obsessed with profit-making. In an incredibly detailed narrative, Aminata Sow Fall makes her character recall the exact maneuver used by the capitalist not only to get away with labor laws but also to lay off her boss, ultimately sending him to jail. Having lost a fight against the capitalist, having lost his job, Galaye has only one course of action to regain entry into the agency of the working class. The action rests upon Islamic and West African practices: to follow the instructions of a marabout and give a piece of paper to an old woman. Facing the skeptical reaction of one old woman seemingly in need of anything but what he had to offer, Galaye forces destiny by including a bit of money in his “gift.”

As Salla Niang later learns, “such gift was necessary to obtain a job” (79). Which is to say that the Islamic West African practice was the key to reenter Western modernization.

The incident makes Salla Niang learn counterintuitively that in a postcolonial society at the crossroads between the advent of capitalist modernity (where money is received by workers from work) and the survival of a millennia-old Islamic African tradition of alms-giving (where gift is received by the beggars from begging), the powerful subject is not the one with money but the one without. The strike, then, will rely precisely on Salla’s hard-learned observation. Through Galaye’s story, an old woman who would otherwise never have been noticed is seen – but not heard – by the necessity of her subject-position. The old woman, insisting that a piece of paper might not change her life, being ready to refuse it and move on to a more useful gift, becomes a necessary agent of change in the modern life of an unemployed man.

That the figure of the beggar might become an inevitable cog in the capitalist machine insofar as the surplus-value they create for the capitalist lies not in the money they produce but the purpose they serve (givers of prayers, good graces, and necessary middle-men between the rational world of the petty bourgeois and the divine protection the same bourgeois still seeks for its rational work) is a comical reversal that repositions the beggar from the periphery to the center of the bourgeois capitalist’s life. In that sense, Salla Niang’s observations and corollary actions on the indispensability of the beggar achieve their goals: a re-centering of otherwise peripheral figures. Her courtyard, away from the city, is where the riches flow, where the powerful beg the beggars. The figure of the beggar has been reconfigured in a new structure (outside of the city) and with a new future (without begging, but still, ironically, as beggars). The very attempt at imagining the beggar as a figure of strategic resistance has necessitated removing him from all that was known about “beggar-ness.” Still not heard, but now seen, the beggars now reside “kilometers and kilometers away from the City,” in a place that has become a tourist attraction where buses and tight crowds wait for their turn to “see the beggars,” with its own bus stop renamed “Stop of the Beggars” (95).

The figure of the beggar no longer represents what can be recognized as such in mainstream cultural representation. Through the intervention of Salla Niang, a figure operating in the liminal space between the life of a beggar and that of a bourgeois, i.e., recognized as a fellow old beggar and yet acting as a new bourgeois, the beggar has brought change onto himself. He has been deterritorialized away from the center, by forces representing capitalist modernity and modernization – cleaning the City from “human clutters” to promote tourism from Europe and the United States, modern worlds *par excellence* in the vision of Mour Ndiaye’s government; and reterritorialized in a new center, the “new neighborhood of the Parcelle Assainies” (a proper noun, literally the translation of a “Cleansed Slot”), as a modern beggar who, paradoxically, puts the finishing touches to the government’s plan: no longer in sight in the City, no longer begging. In a paradoxical turn of events, Salla Niang’s strategy of resistance achieved two seemingly antithetical goals: to prevent the government from doing away with the beggars’ way of life by removing the beggars from the city and from begging; to facilitate the action of the government in removing the beggars from the city by doing away with the beggars’ way of life.

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### Writing and Safe-guarding...

As it became clear that independence did not bring economic prosperity, nor did globalization bring wealth creation, postcolonial governments such as Senghor's (an implied reference in the text) implemented policies that often produced the exact opposite of what they claimed to do. "Tradition" became a necessary slogan shadowing a failed "modernization," and those who embodied the former became the explanation for the failure of the latter. Challenging the implementation of neocolonial policies, writers like Sembène Ousmane, Yambo Ouologuem, Abdoulaye Sadj, Mariama Bâ, Aminata Sow Fall, offered their own response, sarcastically taking this somewhat tautological scapegoating to the letter. In their fictional works, the figure of the poor, the disenfranchised, the peasant, the indigenous subject, the woman, and here the beggar, become the site of a resistance to modernization (or to what we now call "development").

The power of Aminata Sow Fall's novel is that it does not solve the double-binds brought by post-coloniality. It neither forces the reader to choose between "tradition" or "modernity," nor does it present the author's choice. Rather, it denounces the false choice between two already assigned extremes and invites us to reflect on the consequences that follow our inaction: what happens when citizens do not question the premises they are too easily asked to choose from?

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Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Prof. Souleymane Bachir Diagne for eye-opening conversations that led to the thesis advanced in this article.

<sup>2</sup> The conversation can be accessed on the website: <http://intelligences.info/article-2548-aminata-sow-fall-se-confie-je-nai-jamais-eu-dambitions-littraires.html>.

<sup>3</sup> All translations from the original French are those of the author.