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Research Article

Select Novels of Mulk Raj Anand and Charles Dickens: A Comparative Study of Crime, Prison, and Injustice

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Abstract: This paper presents a comparative analysis of representations of crime, penal systems, and administrative justice in selected works by Charles Dickens and Mulk Raj Anand. While Dickens, the quintessential Victorian social critic, dissects the hypocrisies and failures of England's domestic legal and penal institutions, Anand, a pioneer of Indian Anglophone literature, exposes these same systems as tools of colonial subjugation and caste-based oppression in India. Through close readings of *Dickens's Oliver Twist, Great Expectations, and Bleak House, and Anand's Untouchable, Coolie, and Two Leaves and a Bud*, this study argues that both authors converge in portraying the "criminal" as a social victim and the justice system as inherently unjust. However, they diverge fundamentally in their narrative stance and ultimate vision: Dickens, writing from within the system, seeks moral reform and individual redemption, whereas Anand, writing from the colonial periphery, advocates for the system's complete dismantling through collective resistance. Employing theoretical frameworks from Michel Foucault and postcolonial theory, this paper concludes that the "cells" in both corpora function dually—as literal prisons and as the constitutive units of a diseased social body.

Keywords: Crime; Prison; Colonial Justice; Caste; Social Critique

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Introduction

In the opening chapters of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, Bakha, the young sweeper, accidentally pollutes a high-caste Hindu by his touch. The resulting uproar is not treated as a social accident but as a criminal transgression. Bakha is beaten, abused, and told his very presence is an offence. Meanwhile, in the foggy confines of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, the wretched boy Jo, forever told to "move on," exists in a state of perpetual trespass, his poverty itself a crime against the ordered streets of London. These two moments, separated by a century and a continent, reveal a shared literary project: to interrogate how societies manufacture criminals and how systems of justice perpetrate profound injustice. This paper argues that while both Charles Dickens (1812-1870) and Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) use the novel as a powerful lens to expose the carceral and legal machinery of their respective societies as instruments of social control, their critiques emerge from and target fundamentally different power structures. Dickens, the insider-reformer, exposes the moral bankruptcy of a system that claims virtue; Anand, the anti-colonial writer, dismantles the logic of a system designed for racial and caste hegemony.

The Victorian England of Dickens was a society gripped by paradox: immense wealth coexisted with desperate poverty, and fervent evangelical morality with a brutal, dysfunctional penal code. The legacy of the Bloody Code, the spectre of the workhouse, and the chaotic evolution of the legal system provided rich material for a writer obsessed with social justice. In contrast, Anand wrote from within the crucible of colonial India, where the British legal and penal apparatus was superimposed upon a deeply entrenched caste system. The law, theoretically a neutral entity, became in practice a dual weapon: a tool of colonial state power and a reinforcer of indigenous social hierarchy. As literary critic Tabish Khair notes, the colonial subject was often caught in a "double bind of pre-modern and modern disciplinary regimes" (Khair 72).

This study will conduct a comparative analysis across four thematic points. First, it will examine the social genesis of the "criminal" in both authors' works, contrasting Dickens's focus on poverty and neglect with Anand's focus on caste and colonial subjection. Second, it will analyse the metaphorical and literal architectures of confinement, comparing Dickens's psychological prisons with Anand's instruments of colonial discipline. Third, it will dissect the theatre of injustice in courtrooms and police interactions, differentiating Dickensian satire of bureaucracy from Anand's depiction of legal violence. Finally, it will contrast the authors' divergent visions of justice and resolution, from Dickens's personal morality to Anand's nascent collective resistance. Through this framework, supported by primary textual evidence and theoretical insights from Foucault and postcolonial studies, this paper will demonstrate that the "cells" in these novels are both the brick-and-mortar confines of prisons and the individual human units trapped within—and produced by—vast, oppressive systems.

The Manufacture of the 'Criminal': Poverty, Caste, and Colonial Subjection

For both Dickens and Anand, the label "criminal" is a social construct, applied not to the inherently wicked but to victims of systemic failure. Their narratives systematically dismantle this label by foregrounding the environmental and political forces that shape destiny.

In Dickens's universe, crime is overwhelmingly a product of economic desperation and social abandonment. Oliver Twist, the archetypal innocent, is born into a workhouse, a system designed to punish poverty. His famous request for "more" is not greed but a basic biological need, yet it is met with terror and punishment, marking him as a "rebel" (Dickens, *Oliver Twist* 12). The real criminals in *Oliver Twist* are not the ragged denizens of Fagin's den, but the respectable figures like Mr Bumble, whose "the law is an ass—an idiot" pronouncement underscores the system's stupidity, and the neglectful state that creates orphans (Dickens, *Oliver Twist* 413). Similarly, Magwitch in Great Expectations recounts a childhood of being "a ragged little creetur as much to be pitied as ever I see," dragged before magistrates for petty survival crimes, his life a trajectory from societal neglect to criminal branding (Dickens, *Great Expectations* 342). His crime is a direct result of being "sold off" and treated as "vermin." Dickens's indictment is clear: society creates the criminal class through sheer neglect, then hypocritically condemns it.

Anand's critique operates on a more complex, politically charged plane. Here, criminality is often an ontological condition dictated by birth or an inevitable outcome of colonial exploitation. Bakha, in Untouchable, is a criminal by virtue of his existence. His body is a source of pollution; his shadow is a transgression. Anand writes, "He was conscious of the fact that he was an untouchable... the shadow of his body lay on the earth like a dark, ominous cloud" (Anand, *Untouchable* 45). His "crime" at the temple is accidental, yet the punishment is severe and immediate, administered not by a formal court but by the crowd, acting as enforcers of caste law. The system here is not failing; it is working perfectly to maintain purity and hierarchy.

In *Coolie*, Munoo's descent is a result of economic forces intertwined with colonial power. Uprooted from his village, he becomes a unit of labour, a "coolie." His minor theft of a banana is an act of childish hunger, but it sets him on a path where his agency is systematically stripped. When he is ultimately responsible for the death of his employer's child (an accident born of playful ignorance), the narrative emphasises his complete lack of malice and his status as a pawn. The real crime is the exploitative system that uses up and discards such lives. In Two Leaves and a Bud, the Assamese peasant Gangu is criminalised for defending his dignity and his daughter against a British planter. His resistance to colonial sexual exploitation is framed as insolence and rebellion, leading to his murder. Anand shows that, under colonialism, asserting humanity itself becomes a criminal offence. As postcolonial theorist Elleke Boehmer observes, in such narratives, "resistance is necessarily cast as lawlessness" (Boehmer 103).

The crucial divergence lies in agency and design. Dickens's criminals are failed by a system that is supposed to protect but is instead corrupt, inefficient, and cruel. The solution implied is reform. Anand's protagonists are targeted by a system—a confluence

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of colonial law and caste dharma—designed to oppress. The solution implied is not reform but revolution. Both authors generate profound empathy for the condemned. However, while Dickens appeals to the conscience of the powerful within the system, Anand speaks to the solidarity of the oppressed against it.

Architectures of Confinement: The Psychological Carceral and the Colonial Cage

The prison in these novels is never merely a building; it is a metaphor for the human condition under systemic oppression. Dickens and Anand, however, architect these metaphorical prisons with different blueprints: one Gothic and psychological, the other material and political. Dickens's prisons are masterpieces of psychological horror. In *Little Dorrit*, the Marshalsea Debtors' Prison is not just where William Dorrit is incarcerated; it is a state of mind that ensnares his entire family. Born in the Marshalsea, Amy "Little" Dorrit is its "child," and even after their release, the family carries its shame, its habits, its narrow horizons. The prison walls internalise, creating what Foucault would call a "carceral continuum" where the institutional mentality persists beyond the physical space (Foucault 297). Similarly, Newgate Prison casts a long, chilling shadow over Great Expectations. The gibbet, an early symbol of penal terror, haunts Pip's encounter with Magwitch on the marshes. Later, Newgate's aura clings to Pip through his association with Jaggers's clients, representing the inescapable taint of the criminal world and the fragility of his gentlemanly aspirations. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the Bastille symbolises the arbitrary, tyrannical power of the ancien régime. Its stones hold secrets and despair, and its storming is a literal and metaphorical breaking of old confinements. For Dickens, confinement is often a disease of the spirit, a theme captured in Mr Dorrit's pathetic insistence on his "position" within the prison's perverse society.

Anand's carceral imagery is more directly tied to the physicality of colonial power and the social geography of caste. The prison is a concrete tool of the state. In The Sword and the Sickle, Lalu's imprisonment for political activism is a straightforward attempt to break his revolutionary spirit. More pervasively, Anand portrays social space itself as a prison. The outcast colony in *Untouchable* is a spatial cell, segregating Bakha's community from the main village. Bakha's consciousness is a prison of self-loathing and imposed inferiority; he is "imprisoned in the cage of his own soul" by the unrelenting pressure of caste (Anand, *Untouchable* 112). The tea plantation in Two Leaves and a Bud is an economic prison. In this walled enclave, Indian labourers are indentured, controlled, and subjected to the absolute power of the white manager, Mr Croft-Cooke. The "coolie lines" are rows of cells for human storage.

This difference mirrors the theorists' divide. Dickens's vision aligns with a critique of the soul-destroying nature of institutionalisation. Anand's aligns with what Homi Bhabha might call the "colonial mimicry" of institutions—the British prison transplanted to India becomes a site for disciplining the native body and demonstrating absolute power (Bhabha 122). When Gangu is shot, it is an extra-judicial execution that asserts the planter's sovereignty over his plantation prison. For Anand's characters, the threat is not the internalisation of guilt (as with Pip) but the external, violent annihilation of the body by a system that owns it. Dickens's characters fear the decay

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of their soul within the system; Anand's characters fear the destruction of their body by it.

The Theatre of Injustice: Satire of Bureaucracy and the Performance of Colonial Power

The administration of justice—in courtrooms, police stations, and through legal figures—is staged by both authors as a grotesque theatre. However, the performance's genre differs: Dickens directs a savage satire of absurdity, while Anand stages a grim drama of tyranny. Dickens's legal world is a monument to chaos, corruption, and profound alienation. Bleak House offers the most comprehensive indictment through the Court of Chancery. The case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce is not a path to justice but a self-perpetuating entity that " drones on." It is described in organic, monstrous terms: "This scarecrow of a suit has, in the course of time, become so complicated that no man alive knows what it means" (Dickens, *Bleak House* 5). The court consumes lives and fortunes, leaving behind ruins like Miss Flite and the insane Gridley. The law is an impenetrable fog, a "deadly statistical cookery" that processes human suffering into paperwork (Dickens, *Bleak House* 158). In *Oliver Twist*, the courtroom where Oliver is tried for pickpocketing is a farce. The magistrate, Mr Fang, is a caricature of irrationality, ready to condemn the child before hearing evidence. Justice is blindfolded by prejudice and pomp. Similarly, the legal machinery in Great Expectations is personified by Mr Jaggers. He is less a seeker of truth than a manipulator of systems, washing his hands symbolically of his clients' moral filth. His office, with its odd relics of past crimes, is a museum of human wretchedness, and his power derives from understanding and gaming the system, not from upholding abstract justice.

Anand's depiction strips away the bureaucratic fog to reveal a stark power dynamic. The law is not chaotic; it is brutally efficient in serving the ruler. The figure of the daroga (police inspector) is pivotal. He is the local embodiment of state power, almost always depicted as corrupt, violent, and aligned with the local elite or the colonial master. In *Untouchable*, the police are a distant threat, invoked to keep the lower castes in line. In *Coolie*, when a protest occurs at the factory, the authorities side instantly with the management, and the "police began to beat the crowd with their lathis" (Anand, *Coolie* 178). The courtroom in *Two Leaves and a Bud* is the clearest example. After Croft-Cooke kills Gangu, the ensuing trial is a travesty. The colonial judiciary performs a ritual of impartiality, but the outcome is predetermined. The Indian witnesses are intimidated, the evidence is twisted, and the white planter is acquitted. The law performs its function: to legitimise colonial violence under a veneer of legality. As Anand writes, "The law, with its complicated procedures, was a mystery to the peasants... it was the sahib's law" (Anand, *Two Leaves and a Bud* 211).

Dickens critiques the system for being irrational and self-defeating. The joke is on everyone; even the powerful are caught in the web of their own absurd creation. Anand demonstrates that the system is perfectly rational in its oppressive intent. The joke is a cruel one, played by the powerful on the powerless. Dickens's reader is meant to scoff at the ineptitude; Anand's reader is meant to burn with rage at the injustice.

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Visions Beyond the Cell: Moral Reckoning and the Seeds of Revolution

The resolutions offered by Dickens and Anand point to their most profound ideological divergences. Confronted with systemic evil, Dickens ultimately retreats to the realm of individual moral transformation, while Anand, however tentatively, gestures toward collective political struggle. Dickens's novels typically conclude with personal, rather than systemic, salvations. Justice is achieved through coincidence, the discovery of genealogy, and the redemption of individual hearts. In *Great Expectations*, Pip's moral education involves shedding his class prejudice, accepting Magwitch with loyalty, and finding humble work. The corrupt system—Jaggers, Newgate, the debtors' prison—remains intact, but Pip exits its orbit a better man. Similarly, *Bleak House* ends with Esther's domestic happiness in a new, smaller "Bleak House," a private refuge from the public chaos of Chancery. The lawsuit ends only when costs absorb the inheritance, a nihilistic conclusion that punishes everyone. The systemic critique is profound, but the solution is privatised: build a better, kinder home away from the court. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Sydney Carton's sacrificial death is the ultimate individual act of atonement. This Christian gesture brings personal meaning but does not alter the Terror's machinery. Dickens, the reformer, appears to argue that social change begins with a change in the human heart. As G.K. Chesterton noted, Dickens's "reform" was always more "a revolution of the mood" than of the structure (Chesterton 89).

Anand's conclusions are more open-ended and politically charged. They point not inward to the soul, but outward to the collective. The end of *Untouchable* is famously ambiguous but suggestive. After a day of humiliations, Bakha listens to a speech by Mahatma Gandhi and to a counterargument by a modernist poet advocating the adoption of the flush toilet. Bakha is left in a state of confused hope: "He was full of a newborn faith. He would go and live in a place where there was a flush system" (Anand, *Untouchable* 159). The liberation proposed is technological and social—a change in the material conditions that enforce untouchability. It is a secular, modern solution that requires systemic change.

In *The Sword and the Sickle*, the political thrust is unambiguous. Lalu Singh becomes a committed communist organiser. His imprisonment fuels his resolve, and the novel ends with him continuing the struggle. The system must be confronted, not escaped. Even in the tragic Coolie, Munoo's death from tuberculosis in the shadow of a Shiva temple is presented not as a personal moral resolution but as a social indictment. His dying vision is of the mountain god, a symbol of eternity and strength that contrasts with his own crushed fragility, prompting the reader to see his life as a wasted resource in an exploitative economy. Anand plants the seed of political consciousness in his characters and, by extension, in his readers. His work is, as critic M.K. Naik puts it, "a sustained plea for the recognition of the dignity of the insulted and the injured, and a call to action to change the world that insults and injures them" (Naik 65).

Conclusion

The journey through the cells of the system in Dickens's and Anand's novels reveals a robust comparative dialogue on law, power, and humanity. Both authors stand

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as titans of social critique, masterfully demonstrating that the label of "criminal" is a social construct, that prisons extend beyond stone walls into the mind and social fabric, and that the administration of justice can be the most excellent engine of injustice. Their shared project is to generate empathy for the outcast and to indict the powerful. However, their differences are defining. Dickens, embedded in the heart of a confident empire, diagnoses a disease in the body politic. His satire targets irrationality, hypocrisy, and neglect. The "cell" is a dysfunctional organ in a sick but reformable body. The cure lies in individual charity, moral awakening, and institutional tweaks. Anand, writing from the colony, identifies not a disease but a predatory organism. The system is not sick; it is predatory, designed to extract and control. The "cell" here is the holding pen within an extraction machine. The cure lies not in reform but in dismantling the machine itself through collective awareness and resistance.

This comparative study ultimately illuminates how literature reflects and refracts historical positions. Dickens's internal critiques and Anand's external ones are both valid and devastating maps of the carceral landscapes of their worlds. Their enduring relevance is a testament to the unfinished business of justice. In an age of mass incarceration, systemic bias, and global inequalities, the voices of Dickens and Anand continue to resonate, urging us to question who our systems label as criminals, what true justice looks like, and whether our societal cells are meant for rehabilitation or merely for containment and control. The answer, as these novels suggest, depends fundamentally on whether one is inside the system looking out, or outside, pressing against its bars.

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