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# Negotiating Ethical Transformation and the Quest for Identity in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and K.S. Ravikumar's *Baashha*

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### Abstract

Comparative literary studies increasingly examine texts across linguistic, national, and media boundaries to uncover shared human concerns. Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861) and K. S. Ravikumar's Tamil film *Baashha* (1995) emerge from radically different historical and cultural contexts, yet both engage deeply with questions of identity, social mobility, moral transformation, and the relationship between individual aspiration and social responsibility. Dickens explores the complexities of Victorian class consciousness through the development of Pip, an orphan who seeks to transcend his humble origins and become a gentleman. Ravikumar presents Manickam, an apparently ordinary auto-rickshaw driver who conceals his former identity as the feared underworld leader Baashha. Both protagonists negotiate fractured identities shaped by social expectations, personal histories, and ethical obligations.

This paper argues that *Great Expectations* and *Baashha* challenge dominant ideologies of status and power by demonstrating that authentic human worth derives not from wealth, class position, or public authority but from moral integrity, loyalty, and self-knowledge. Through comparative analysis of characterization, narrative structure, class discourse, family relationships, heroism, and redemption, the essay shows that despite differences in medium and context, both works articulate a universal critique of social hierarchy and affirm the primacy of ethical responsibility.

**Keywords:** Comparative Literature, *Great Expectations*, *Baashha*, Identity Formation, Social Mobility, Class Consciousness, Moral Redemption, Tamil Cinema, Victorian Literature, Cultural Studies.

### Introduction

Comparative literature seeks to identify meaningful connections between works separated by language, geography, and historical period. Such comparisons reveal that different societies often grapple with similar social and philosophical questions. Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and K. S. Ravikumar's *Baashha* provide an illuminating example of this phenomenon. Published in 1861, *Great Expectations* reflects Victorian anxieties concerning class mobility, industrial capitalism, and social respectability. Dickens constructs a Bildungsroman in which Pip's development exposes the contradictions of Victorian class ideology. More than a century later, *Baashha* emerged as one of the defining films of Tamil cinema. The film centers on Manickam, an auto-driver who suppresses his violent past in order to honor family obligations and pursue a morally responsible life. Critics frequently identify the film as a landmark in the construction of the Tamil cinematic hero. At the center of both works lies a struggle between social identity and moral identity. Pip attempts to reinvent himself as a gentleman, while Manickam attempts to escape his reputation as a feared gangster. Their journeys reveal that identity is neither fixed nor determined solely by social position. Instead, both narratives suggest that authentic identity emerges

through ethical conduct and personal responsibility.

One of the most significant themes connecting the two works is social mobility. In *Great Expectations*, Pip becomes acutely aware of class distinctions after meeting Estella. Reflecting on her contempt for his social position, he confesses: "I wished Joe had been rather more genteelly brought up, and then I should have been so too" (Dickens 99). This statement reveals the extent to which Pip internalizes Victorian class prejudice. He begins to regard Joe's honesty and affection as inferior to the superficial elegance associated with gentility. Dickens thereby exposes the ideological power of class distinctions. The novel repeatedly demonstrates that class advancement fails to produce genuine fulfillment. As commentators note, social class is central to the novel's plot, but Dickens ultimately suggests that affection, loyalty, and inner worth are more important than wealth or status.

The movie, *Baashha* presents a contrasting yet related model of social mobility. Manickam possesses immense power but deliberately renounces it. Unlike Pip, who seeks upward mobility, Manickam seeks anonymity. His humble occupation as an auto-driver reflects a conscious rejection of authority and prestige. The film portrays him as a man who avoids violence and conceals his past in order to keep a promise to his father. Despite these differences, both narratives critique

status-based conceptions of success. Social advancement does not guarantee happiness, and social authority does not necessarily indicate moral superiority.

Identity functions as the central concern of both narratives. Pip's transformation into a gentleman involves a process of self-fashioning. He attempts to construct a new identity through education, dress, and social association. However, Dickens repeatedly reveals the instability of this identity. After meeting Estella, Pip recalls: "I thought how common Estella would consider Joe, a mere blacksmith" (Dickens 55). The quotation demonstrates that Pip's perception of himself becomes increasingly dependent upon external judgment. He begins to view his past as a source of shame.

Similarly, Manickam's identity is divided between two social roles: devoted family man and legendary gangster. The film's narrative structure depends upon the gradual revelation of this hidden identity. Viewers initially encounter him as a humble worker before learning that he was once Baashha, a figure feared throughout the criminal underworld. The concealment of identity serves different purposes in each text. Pip conceals his origins because he desires social advancement. Manickam conceals his past because he desires moral renewal. Yet both characters discover that the past cannot be permanently erased. The narratives thus suggest that authentic identity requires reconciliation rather than denial.

Family relationships function as moral anchors in both works. Joe Gargery embodies the ethical center of *Great Expectations*. His kindness, humility, and loyalty contrast sharply with Pip's growing social pretensions. Joe's wisdom becomes evident when he advises Pip: "If you can't get to be uncommon through going straight, you'll never get to do it through going crooked" (Dickens 54). This statement encapsulates one of Dickens's central moral arguments. Genuine distinction arises from ethical conduct rather than social status. Joe's enduring affection remains unchanged despite Pip's neglect. His unconditional loyalty ultimately exposes the moral emptiness of the social world that Pip seeks to enter.

In *Baashha*, family responsibility similarly motivates the protagonist's actions. Manickam abandons his former identity because he wishes to protect his parents and siblings from violence. His commitment to family supersedes personal ambition. The cultural contexts differ significantly. Dickens reflects Victorian domestic ideals, while Ravikumar emphasizes South Indian traditions of filial duty. Nevertheless, both narratives present family as a source of ethical guidance that transcends social hierarchy.

Redemption constitutes the moral center of both narratives. Pip's development follows a pattern of error, recognition, and renewal. His mistakes stem not from innate wickedness but from misplaced values. As he matures, he recognizes the flaws in his earlier assumptions. Near the conclusion of the novel, Pip expresses profound regret: "Don't tell him, Joe, that I was thankless; don't tell him... that I was ungenerous and unjust" (Dickens 376). This confession signals Pip's moral awakening. He recognizes that gratitude and loyalty are more important than social advancement.

Accordingly, Manickam seeks redemption through renunciation. His decision to abandon the criminal world reflects a conscious effort to create a morally meaningful life. The film portrays redemption not as passive remorse but as active responsibility. Both narratives reject deterministic views of character. Individuals are capable of change, growth, and self-correction.

The protagonists represent different cultural models of

heroism. Pip is a psychological hero. His struggles occur primarily within the realm of conscience and self-understanding. The novel's focus remains internal and reflective. Manickam, by contrast, embodies the larger-than-life hero of Tamil popular cinema. His strength, charisma, and physical courage align with audience expectations regarding mass heroism. Yet his true heroism derives from restraint rather than violence. The film repeatedly depicts him as a non-violent and helpful figure whose hidden power emerges only when his family is threatened. The contrast between the two characters reveals the adaptability of heroic ideals across cultures. Although they differ in outward behavior, both become admirable because they prioritize ethical responsibility over personal gain. Thus, Dickens and Ravikumar redefine heroism as moral rather than social achievement.

Both narratives challenge assumptions based on appearances. Pip initially believes that wealth and gentility signify virtue. This assumption collapses when he discovers that his benefactor is the convict Magwitch. Describing his reaction, Pip admits: "The abhorrence in which I held the man... could not have been exceeded if he had been some terrible beast" (Dickens 320). The quotation exposes Pip's internalized class prejudice. He judges Magwitch according to social position rather than character.

Altogether, *Baashha* depends upon the discrepancy between appearance and reality. Manickam appears weak and ordinary, yet he possesses extraordinary power. The film repeatedly demonstrates that true character cannot be determined through superficial observation. In both works, revelation serves as a mechanism for moral education. Characters and audiences alike learn to question appearances and recognize deeper truths.

The two works employ different narrative strategies to achieve similar thematic effects. *Great Expectations* uses first-person retrospective narration. Adult Pip recounts the mistakes and illusions of his younger self, allowing readers to observe both youthful ignorance and mature understanding. This structure creates dramatic irony: readers often perceive the flaws in Pip's judgments before he does.

*Baashha*, by contrast, relies on delayed revelation and flashbacks. The audience initially encounters Manickam as an ordinary auto-driver before gradually discovering his past as a powerful gangster. The film's suspense depends upon this concealment. As critics have noted, the screenplay is structured around the tension between Manickam's peaceful present and his violent past. Despite these formal differences, both narratives use revelation to transform audience perception. Pip's discovery that Magwitch is his benefactor forces a reevaluation of class assumptions, while the revelation of Manickam's identity forces a reevaluation of power and morality. In each case, the hidden truth exposes the inadequacy of surface appearances.

Both works offer critiques of the societies they depict. Dickens exposes the inequalities of Victorian England, where class distinctions shape opportunities, relationships, and self-perception. Scholars observe that the novel ranges across multiple social strata and ultimately challenges the belief that inherited or acquired status determines human value. *Baashha* critiques a different social order. The film portrays a world in which official institutions are often ineffective and informal networks of power dominate urban life. Manickam's authority as Baashha exists outside the formal structures of the state, suggesting that power in modern society may operate through personal loyalty and fear as much as through legal

institutions. Yet the film ultimately rejects the glorification of criminal authority by portraying Manickam's renunciation of power as his greatest achievement. In both texts, social critique is inseparable from moral critique. Dickens questions the legitimacy of class hierarchy, while Ravikumar questions the legitimacy of power divorced from ethical responsibility.

A comparative examination of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and K. S. Ravikumar's *Baashha* reveals significant thematic parallels despite substantial differences in medium, genre, and historical context. Both narratives explore social mobility, divided identity, family loyalty, moral redemption, and the limitations of status-based definitions of success. Pip and Manickam pursue different paths, yet each discovers that external recognition cannot substitute for ethical integrity. Dickens critiques Victorian class ideology, while Ravikumar interrogates modern structures of power and authority. Both ultimately affirm that dignity derives from compassion, responsibility, and self-knowledge rather than wealth or prestige.

The enduring appeal of these works lies in their capacity to address universal human concerns. Through their portrayals of flawed yet redeemable protagonists, Dickens and Ravikumar demonstrate that genuine greatness emerges not from social elevation but from moral growth.

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