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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism*

Satirizing bureaucratic failure and urban dysfunction in Faith Ben-Daniels's *A Quarter Past Midnight* (2013)

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ABSTRACT

African postcolonial cities are frequently rendered in literature as spaces where colonial administrative structures persist, shaping urban life through delay, confusion, and institutional alienation long after independence. However bureaucratic satire within African urban fiction remains insufficiently theorized, and *A Quarter Past Midnight* (2013) has not received sustained scholarly attention through a postcolonial urban lens, leaving its critique of institutional dysfunction underexplored. This study investigates Faith Ben-Daniels's *A Quarter Past Midnight* (2013) as a satirical exploration of bureaucratic failure and urban dysfunction within this postcolonial context. It further aims to examine how the novel uses satire to expose the absurdity and inefficiency of postcolonial bureaucratic institutions, and how ordinary urban dwellers navigate the jurisdictional confusion these institutions produce. The study adopts a qualitative close reading methodology, purposively selecting key scenes of bureaucratic encounter in the novel for textual analysis. It is anchored in Postcolonial Urban Theory, which reads the African city as a site where colonial administrative legacies continue to structure institutional power and everyday experience. Using this theoretical lens, the study analyzes how the novel's satirical techniques render the city itself as both a physical and institutional terrain of postcolonial contestation. The findings reveal that the novel's satire operates as a pointed critique of bureaucratic structures inherited from colonial governance, while also depicting the resourcefulness and endurance of citizens caught within them. The study concludes that *A Quarter Past Midnight* (2013) makes a distinctive contribution to African urban satire by positioning bureaucratic dysfunction not as incidental detail but as the central site through which postcolonial identity and urban survival are enacted.

KEYWORDS: bureaucracy, failure, postcolonial city, satire, urban dysfunction

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1.0 Introduction

Postcolonial cities in Africa place literary subjects as pivotal and, functioning as sites where the promises of independence collide with the unresolved legacies of colonial rule (Myers, 2011). However, political independence in Africa did not dismantle colonial administrative structures; rather, these structures were reabsorbed into new national bureaucracies, where they continue to shape everyday urban life in altered but recognizable forms (Evans, 2023; Thomson, 2022). Gümüş (2026) describes this as a post-independence dilemma, in which sovereign states reproduce colonial systems of governance under new political identities. Consequently, literature has persistently turned to the city as a critical space for exposing this incomplete transition, dramatizing how colonial administrative logics endure within postcolonial institutions (Heathcote, 2024; Hiddleston, 2017).

Within this context, satire emerges not only as a stylistic choice but as a deliberate critical strategy for interrogating bureaucratic dysfunction. Unlike realist narration, which often confines itself to descriptive representation, satire possesses the capacity to exaggerate, distort, and ridicule institutional absurdities, thereby revealing deeper contradictions embedded in bureaucratic systems (Juraev et al., 2026). As Essuman et al. (2021) argue in their study of post-independence African drama, satire functions as a powerful instrument for exposing the inefficiencies, corruption, and moral bankruptcy of state institutions, transforming literary spaces into sites of political critique. This suggests that satire does more than entertain; it actively dismantles the façade of bureaucratic legitimacy by foregrounding its inherent irrationalities.

It is within this broader satirical tradition that Faith Ben-Daniels's *A Quarter Past Midnight* (2013) is situated. The novel offers a sustained critique of bureaucratic failure as a defining feature of postcolonial urban existence, illustrating how institutional inefficiency produces a condition akin to a state of limbo, where formal structures exist but fail to meaningfully serve the populace. Through its satirical lens, the text exposes the disjuncture between bureaucratic formality and lived urban realities, thereby reinforcing the argument that postcolonial institutions often operate as hollow extensions of colonial governance.

In spite of the prominence of satire in African literary traditions, bureaucratic satire in African urban fiction remains insufficiently theorized as a distinct analytical category. While scholarship on postcolonial African literature has extensively engaged themes of violence, political instability, and social transformation (Rukuni, 2026; Ayoade, 2019; Nisar & Masood, 2021; Evans 2023), it has paid comparatively little attention to how satire specifically interrogates bureaucratic systems. More significantly, *A Quarter Past Midnight* (2013) has not received sustained postcolonial urban analysis, leaving its critique of bureaucratic dysfunction underexplored. This gap is critical because it obscures the ways in which satire operates as a mode of resistance against institutional absurdity.

This article, therefore, argues that *A Quarter Past Midnight* (2013) deploys satire as a strategic narrative device to expose the inefficiency, absurdity, and contradictions of postcolonial bureaucratic institutions, while simultaneously illustrating how ordinary urban dwellers navigate the jurisdictional confusion such institutions produce. Anchored in postcolonial urban theory, the study reads the African city as a space where colonial administrative legacies continue to structure both institutional power and everyday experience.

2.0 Literature Review

Scholarship relevant to this study coalesces around three interconnected areas: postcolonial bureaucracy and the state, satire as a mode of political and social critique, and the postcolonial African city as a literary subject. A close reading of these three bodies of work together reveals a persistent gap: while each area has been substantially theorized in its own right, their intersection, bureaucratic satire as a literary strategy for representing African urban dysfunction, remains critically underexplored.

According to Ayoade (2019), postcolonial African states exhibit what he terms “bureaupathology” institutions that have come to alienate rather than serve the citizens they were nominally created to govern. Evans (2023) extends this argument historically, demonstrating that in the African case such structures were not incidental byproducts of colonial rule but deliberately engineered instruments of racial administration, a finding that complicates any reading of bureaucratic dysfunction as accidental or residual. In a similar vein, more recent scholarship has broadened this critique both geographically and theoretically. Nisar and Masood (2021) offer a systematic review of postcolonial public administration scholarship, contending that the field has only recently begun to interrogate how colonial epistemologies continue to shape bureaucratic practice across the Global South.

Correspondingly, Adi and Triwardani (2025) apply a postcolonial sociological lens to legal formalism within Indonesian bureaucracy, suggesting that the entanglement of colonial legal logic and bureaucratic administration is a pattern extending well beyond the African continent.

More so, Isiekwu's (n.d) conceptual analysis of the transition from colonial bureaucracy to digital governance further indicates that these inherited structures are by no means static but continue to evolve, thereby raising the question of whether satire aimed at bureaucratic dysfunction targets a fixed colonial residue or a constantly mutating administrative culture. On the whole, these studies firmly establish that postcolonial bureaucracy is widely understood as a site of inherited colonial power rather than neutral administration. What remains largely absent from this body of work, however, is any sustained engagement with how these dynamics are represented, exaggerated, or contested within literary narrative, as the scholarship remains confined almost exclusively to political science and public administration.

In addition, a foundational definitional work by Park-Ozee (2019) and Declercq (2018) seeks to establish satire's defining features namely its reliance on irony, exaggeration, and an implicit corrective or critical purpose, with both scholars cautioning that, absent a clear definitional framework, satire risks being invoked too loosely as an analytic category.

Building on this groundwork, Brock (2018) examines satire's disruptive political potential through the lens of irony and cynicism across contrasting national contexts, thereby situating satire as an inherently comparative and culturally contingent phenomenon. However, Caron (2016) and Holm (2023) adopt a more skeptical posture, questioning whether satire retains genuine critical force within a postmodern, media-saturated environment or whether it has instead been absorbed into what Holm (2023, p. 9) terms the "reification of cultural politics." Zekavat's (2026) recent analysis of political satire within neoliberal media industries pushes this skepticism further still, arguing that satire's critical edge is increasingly constrained by the very commercial and cultural structures it purports to critique. This unresolved tension between satire as genuine resistance and satire as a co-opted, defanged gesture bears directly on the present study, insofar as it raises the question of whether bureaucratic satire in African fiction functions as effective critique or as a more ambivalent, even complicit, mode of representation.

Further, broader postcolonial urban literary theory exemplified by Krishnan's (2015) work on spatiality and cosmopolitanism, and Marx's (2017) inquiry into the postcolonial novel's urban longing for form which establishes the city as a site where postcolonial identity and narrative form are mutually constituted. In the same vein, Ajah (2024) narrows the focus further with an explicitly African emphasis, examining postcolonial utopianism in African urban literary representation and suggesting that African cities in fiction oscillate persistently between sites of aspiration and sites of disillusionment.

Closer still to the present study's concerns is Sadaf and Iftikhar (2025) who demonstrate how satire functions as a mode of resistance against power and corruption in Mohammed Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, while Rani and Sarkar (2026) similarly examine bureaucratic satire within the fiction of Upamanyu Chatterjee, and Al and El-nasir (2026) analyze satire and social decay in Elnathan John's *Be(com)ing Nigerian* and Adamu Usman's *Bivan's House*. These studies confirm that bureaucratic and institutional satire constitutes an active and well-recognized mode within postcolonial fiction more broadly. Nevertheless, their case studies are drawn predominantly from South Asian and other Nigerian texts, leaving *A Quarter Past Midnight* (2013) itself and its specific engagement with Ghanaian or West African urban bureaucratic dysfunction unexamined. Dorte's (2023) doctoral study of ruinscape in contemporary South African fiction further signals sustained scholarly interest in the postcolonial African city as a decaying or dysfunctional space, though it likewise does not engage with satire as its primary representational mode.

Evans (2023), Ayoade (2019) and Essuman et al, (2021) have established three things with reasonable clarity: that postcolonial bureaucracy is widely theorized as an inherited, and often deliberately engineered, colonial legacy; that satire remains a contested however critically significant literary mode for representing institutional dysfunction; and that the African city has become an increasingly prominent subject of postcolonial literary analysis. Nowhere, however, do these three areas converge to examine bureaucratic satire as a literary strategy operating specifically within an African urban setting through sustained textual analysis of a single work. This gap is particularly pronounced in the case of *A Quarter Past Midnight* (2013) which, despite its explicit engagement with bureaucratic failure and urban dysfunction, has not received scholarly attention through a postcolonial urban lens. It is precisely this gap that the present study sets out to address.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Postcolonial Urban Theory, which reads the African city not as a neutral or universal spatial form but as a site shaped by the specific histories of colonialism and its administrative afterlives (Myers, 2011). The theory rests on several interlocking tenets that, taken together, distinguish it from mainstream Western-derived urban theory.

At its core, Postcolonial Urban Theory holds that African cities cannot be adequately understood through urban models derived from Western contexts alone, since such models presuppose historical trajectories of urbanization, governance, and citizenship that African cities have not shared (Myers, 2011). Universal frameworks, however analytically elegant, risk flattening the specific colonial histories that continue to shape African urban life.

A second, closely related tenet holds that colonial-era spatial and administrative logics do not disappear with formal independence but persist, in altered form, within postcolonial institutions, infrastructure, and everyday bureaucratic practice positioning the postcolonial city as a site of unfinished transition rather than a clean break from its colonial past.

Jazeel (2018) extends this critique methodologically, arguing that mainstream urban studies tend to reify the city and urbanization as universal objects of analysis through methodological urbanization, and that perspectives from outside this framing are needed to expose the limits of its knowledge claims. This constitutes a third tenet: that urban knowledge produced from a single vantage point cannot account for the full range of socio-spatial processes across different colonial and postcolonial contexts, and that views from outside urban studies itself are analytically necessary.

Rankin (2010) approaches the same concern from the standpoint of planning practice, contending that postcolonial critique demands an ethics of accountability that recognizes how planning theory's own concepts and categories are shaped by histories of colonialism and imperialism, rather than standing outside them as neutral tools. This furnishes a fourth tenet, an ethical one: that reading a postcolonial city whether in planning practice or in literary representation is never a neutral act, but one implicated in the same power relations it seeks to describe.

In sum, these tenets converge on a fifth and central claim: that the postcolonial city is a site where power, identity, and survival are continuously contested, rather than a fixed backdrop against which unrelated social or institutional dramas unfold. This theoretical orientation has not gone unchallenged. Storper and Scott (2016) mount a direct critique of postcolonial urban theory, arguing that its emphasis on particularism and the "provincialisation" of knowledge obscures what they consider fundamental, cross-contextual patterns of urbanization that hold true regardless of a city's colonial history. Leitner and Sheppard (2016), by contrast, defend precisely this provincializing impulse, contending that no single, universal theory can adequately account for the variegated nature of urbanization across the world, and that peripheral perspectives including those grounded in specific postcolonial histories are indispensable to a fuller understanding of urban life. Jazeel's (2018) call for views from outside urban studies lend further support to this position, since it insists that urban theory's own textual field cannot be treated as a self-sufficient or complete account of socio-spatial process. This study aligns with this latter position: while Storper and Scott's call for theoretical universality may hold value for comparative urban economics, it is precisely the particularism they reject that makes Postcolonial Urban

Theory suited to literary analysis, where the object of study is not urbanization as an abstract global process but a single city's fictional rendering of a specific colonial and administrative inheritance.

It is this specificity that justifies the framework's application to *A Quarter Past Midnight* (2013). Because the novel's bureaucratic dysfunction is portrayed not as generic institutional inefficiency but as a legacy of colonial administrative structures operating within a distinctly postcolonial urban setting, Postcolonial Urban Theory supplies the vocabulary necessary to read the city itself as an active site of meaning-making to the novel's satirical concerns. Rankin's (2010) call for an ethics of accountability further reinforces the appropriateness of this framework, since reading the novel's satire through a postcolonial lens requires attentiveness to the same colonial power relations that planning theory itself must reckon with.

Operationally, this framework is applied to identify how spatial and institutional arrangements within the novel reflect colonial administrative legacies, and how characters' everyday negotiations with bureaucracy reveal the postcolonial city as contested terrain, on which questions of power, identity, and survival are continuously enacted.

4.0 Discussion

A Quarter Past Midnight (2013) by Faith Ben-Daniels follows Dr. Pearl Asare, a psychiatrist implicated in the murder of Ewura Abena Lawson, and Detective Emmanuel, the officer assigned to investigate the case. As Emmanuel navigates an under-resourced police force, an evasive municipal bureaucracy, and a court system that favours the wealthy, the novel exposes the everyday failures of postcolonial institutions even as it moves toward Pearl's eventual arrest, trial, and exoneration.

4.1 Bureaucratic Failure and the Postcolonial State

Faith Ben-Daniels's *A Quarter Past Midnight* (2013) mirrors the bureaucratic dysfunction that characterises the postcolonial African state, dramatizing institutional failure not as an isolated incident confined to a single office but as a condition embedded, from the very beginning of the narrative, in the ordinary fabric of everyday life. The novel presents a state apparatus that survives by deferring responsibility instead of discharging it, a pattern that recurs, with only minor variation, across the public and private sectors alike. This discussion is accordingly organised in two parts: firstly, an examination of the chain of official deflection that runs from the town mayor down to the ordinary duty officer; and secondly, an examination of the manner in which this same deflection reproduces itself within the private sector and the informal economy that has emerged to compensate for the state's absence.

Firstly, the novel opens its institutional critique at the precise moment its central victim is running for her life, which is itself a deliberate narrative choice: civic failure and mortal danger are made to occupy the same sentence. As the unnamed victim flees down an unlit road, the narration interrupts the danger of the scene to ask, almost conversationally, "was this really part of town? And if it was, what divide was it attached to?" before answering its own question with a small piece of civic theatre, observing that the town mayor "would eagerly shift the blame on the district council with an excuse like": "it is out of my municipal jurisdiction" or "we have given the contract to ECG," or "I will consult the committee in charge" (Ben-Daniels, 2013, p. 2).

The three-part structure of this deflection, mayor to council to ECG to committee, is itself the satirical mechanism: each clause hands responsibility to the next body in the chain, so that by the third excuse the reader has already stopped expecting the road to be lit. This widens its target almost immediately, moving from a single evasive mayor to an entire administrative class, observing that "we live in a country where everything has to pass through committees with three-piece-suit bourgeoisies who take too many coffee breaks" (Ben-Daniels, 2013, p. 2). The three-piece suit and the coffee break are not incidental details; they are markers of a bureaucratic elite whose visible comfort stands in direct and uncomfortable contrast to the invisible citizen still standing, unprotected, on an unlit road. This aligns with Ayoade's (2019) account of bureaupathology, in which institutions are structured to defer responsibility rather than discharge it, this opening sequence does more than illustrate the concept: it dramatizes the precise mechanism, deflection multiplied across committee layers. Correspondingly, Evans's (2023) insistence that such structures are maintained by design instead by accident is confirmed by the sheer specificity of the mayor's excuses, each one plausible enough to sound rehearsed other than improvised.

Moreover, this same deflection, is shown to begin even earlier in the ordinary commuter's day, before any crime has occurred at all. Pearl's commute on an unreliable public bus system establishes the point: the tro-tro minibuses that ferry Accra's workers are "fond of breaking down in morning traffic," a problem compounded by fuel shortages, since "tro-tro drivers are in the habit of buying 'one gallon' and expecting the car to run on it forever" (Ben-Daniels, 2013, p. 5). What sharpens this into satire, however, is its final observation, that "tro-tro mates somehow always collect the fare before the bus breaks down," after which "they ended up fighting with passengers who want their monies returned" (Ben-Daniels, 2013, p. 6). The timing here is the joke: payment is secured before the service fails, so that the failure itself becomes, structurally, no one's financial problem but the passengers. In this way, infrastructural collapse is normalized as an unremarkable feature of the daily commute long before the novel's central institutions, the police and the courts, are ever put to the test.

In the same vein, the same institutional hollowness structures the novel's treatment of police work, though here the comedy of the opening pages gives way to something closer to quiet indictment. Chief Martins' private reflection lays the condition out directly: "there was no scientific support to help the police solve homicide cases," and "the presence of a forensic lab or crime scene investigation unit was only a figment of the imagination of the average Ghanaian police man," a situation made worse because "on-lookers tampered with the scene, messing up all possible evidence that could have been retrieved" (Ben-Daniels, 2013, p. 72). Nisar and Masood (2021) identify precisely this gap, between the outward form of postcolonial public administration and the resourcing that form once assumed under colonial-era bureaucracy, as the unfinished business of postcolonial administration scholarship. The narration does not let the matter rest with the missing lab; it presses further, adding that:

even if the evidence was gathered, there would still be no lab to send it to. So, a detective had to think; cases were solved by mental analysis and courtroom oratories. Why wouldn't Chief Martins develop headaches?

(Ben-Daniels, 2013, p. 73)

This repetition, first the absence of the lab, then the absence of anywhere to send evidence even if it were collected, is not redundant; instead, it forecloses, one clause at a time, every objection which might raise on the state's behalf, until Emmanuel's reliance on hunches, interpersonal networks, and courtroom oratory stops looking like a stylistic choice on the detective's part and starts looking like the only option a broken system has left him. In this way, Ayoade's (2019) institutional hollowness acquires narrative consequence: the murder at the centre of the plot can only be solved despite the state, never through it.

Consequently, the satire extends past the police into the private sector standing in to fill the state's gaps, and into the state's own inconsistent priorities. Emmanuel's unspoken verdict on a security-firm manager makes the point through caricature rather than statement:

there was something crooked about him. How in the name of all that was sensible could a potbellied, criminal-looking glutton like this manage a security firm? In this country of ours you could bet your last cedi that one would be confronted with such absurdity. (Ben -Daniels,2013,p. 196)

The physical excess described the potbelly, the glutton, is not incidental mockery; it suggests that private security has absorbed the same cronyism weakening public oversight, a private mirror of the very failure it exists to compensate for.

Similarly, the novel's running joke about office culture works through hyperbole instead of direct statement: told by an evasive manager that "I was in a meeting," Emmanuel privately mimics him, reflecting that "in this country even if a man was chasing with his four-year-old son, he told you he was in a meeting" (Ben-Daniels,2013, p. 197). The image of a father in mid-pursuit still reflexively invoking a meeting exposes the phrase as an empty ritual, a password for avoidance as opposed to a description of anything actually happening. Just as Juraev et al. (2026), this kind of bureaucratic satire as exposing institutional failure on two registers at once, political and, in their term, metaphysical, and the novel's closing move in this sequence supports that double reading precisely. In the novel, Emmanuel observing an ambulance rushing a corpse to Accra, makes a sad remark "interesting how this country transported dead bodies with so much urgency. If the guy were to be alive, it would be a taxi rushing him to the hospital, and certainly no doctors ready at hand to attend to the emergency on arrival" (Ben-Baniels,2013, p. 241). This juxtaposition of two speeds within a single institution, urgent for the dead, absent for the living, is what gives the line its force, and it is not simply a matter of underfunding. Finally, then, Ayoade's (2019) account of institutions alienated from the citizens they exist to serve becomes, in this closing image, a matter of literal timing: help arrives, but only once it is too late for it to matter, which is precisely the systemic failure.

4.2 Satire as a Mode of Political and Social Critique

In Faith Ben-Daniels's *A Quarter Past Midnight* (2013), satire operates as a mode of political and social critique by compressing into a single ironic gesture an argument the novel might otherwise need a full paragraph to state. This satirical compression raises, in turn, a question of representation left implicit by the preceding discussion: whether the exaggeration on which satire depends remains tethered to a reality the reader already recognises as true, or whether it collapses into empty comic invention. The discussion is accordingly organised in two stages: firstly, an examination of how the novel's sharpest satirical lines operate through withholding instead of explanation; and secondly, an examination of the manner in which this withholding depends on the reader's prior recognition of the reality it compresses.

Firstly, compressed irony of this kind is what Park-Ozee (2019) and Declercq (2018) treat as satire's most efficient rhetorical unit, irony doing in one line the work that direct statement would need a paragraph to accomplish. The clearest instance of this occurs at a police checkpoint, where a murderer drives past his own victim's ghost. The officer, seeing only the trappings of professional privilege, "flashed his light on the windscreen, saw the Ghana Medical Association car sticker, the doctor sign and Korle-bu Medical Staff sticker and quickly backed off," even saluting the driver with "safe journey sah!" (Ben-Daniels,2013,p. 189). Felix's ghost cries out, "check the trunk! The man has my body in the trunk!", but "the policeman could not see or hear him," and the barrier is duly raised (Ben-Daniels,2013,p. 189). The response to this scene of literal, ghostly injustice is simply few words: "what an interesting country! Just because of a GMA sticker? As if criminals could not be found in the medical profession or any other profession!" (Ben-Daniels,2013, p. 189). This withholds explanation almost entirely, and that withholding

is itself the technique: rather than naming selective enforcement as an injustice, it simply lets the scene indict itself. This is close to what Brock (2018) describes as cynicism functioning as a disruptive political register, a mode of speech that critiques by refusing to argue, because arguing would concede that the injustice needs proving in the first place.

Secondly, this kind of satire only works if a further question is settled, since what is at stake in every satirical line examined so far is not simply comic exaggeration but whether that exaggeration remains tethered to something the reader recognises as true. A satirical claim that failed to represent any recognisable reality would, after all, collapse into empty invention, amusing perhaps, but toothless as critique. In other words, “what an interesting country!” (Ben-Daniels,2013,p. 189) only lands as social commentary because the reader already believes, on the strength of lived or reported experience, that Ghanaian checkpoints really do wave elite vehicles through unchecked; strip away that mimetic anchoring, and the line becomes merely whimsical rather than damning. Consequently, satire cannot, in this novel, be treated as an autonomous comic mode: the satirical charge of a line such as this one is entirely parasitic on its credibility, and it is this relationship between comic form and representational truth.

This same dependence on credibility governs the novel’s account of the informal transport economy that carries its characters through the city, where the satire is more sustained but the underlying logic identical. Emmanuel, though himself a police detective, knows better than to challenge this economy on its own terms:

“he had made it a policy never to get into fights with any tro-tro driver. Once you were not one of them there was an enormous possibility that you would lose the fight. Some of these drivers had sharp tongues and could really use abusive language with such an amazing flair that their opponents always ended up regretting getting into verbal exchanges with them.” (Ben-Daniels,2013, p. 217)

Even a police officer, in other words, defers to the tro-tro drivers own informal authority rather than his formal one, a small but telling inversion of who is understood to hold power on the road.

In the novel, the observation that “these drivers broke traffic rules with impunity” (Ben-Daniels,2013,p. 223) describes a transit culture answerable only to itself, a parallel system of rules enforced by insiders rather than by any traffic authority. However, the satire’s most telling turn arrives immediately afterward, when Emmanuel himself, having just condemned the tro-tro driver’s lawlessness, “immediately turned around, breaking two traffic regulations in the process,” only to have “the traffic warden at the end of the road flash his light in anger” and receive, in reply, Emmanuel’s police identity card and “an apologetic grin,” at which “the warden nodded in disapproval and looked away” (Ben-Daniels,2013,p. 223).

This detail matters precisely because it complicates Emmanuel’s condemnation of the tro-tro drivers, revealing it as a condemnation issued from a position of authority that is itself compromised: the detective condemns lawlessness in one breath and escapes accountability for his own in the next, purely on the strength of an identity card. On this point, Caron (2016) and Holm (2023) would read the novel’s tone with some suspicion, since the passage never quite condemns the drivers, or indeed the detective, it describes; by contrast, Zekavat’s (2026) more ambivalent account of satire fits the moment better, because the novel manages to mock the lawlessness of the roads while also, almost admiringly, preserving the resourcefulness of the drivers who navigate them, and the detective’s own complicity. The satire, in other words, does not resolve into either pure critique or pure celebration, and that unresolved doubleness is itself part of what the novel is arguing about urban survival under institutional absence, an argument that only holds, again, because the representation underneath it rings true.

This same reliance on the reader’s prior recognition of Ghanaian official speech is nowhere clearer than in the mayor’s three-part deflection considered earlier. Consider once more the mayor’s three-part deflection: “it is out of my municipal jurisdiction,” “we have given the contract to ECG,” “I will consult the committee in charge” (Ben-Daniels,2013,p. 2). None of these three excuses is invented for comic effect; however, each is a recognisable, almost stock phrase of Ghanaian public administration, the kind of sentence a reader is more likely to have heard from an actual official than to have encountered first in fiction. The novel’s satirical technique, therefore, depends entirely on this prior familiarity: the humour is not in the phrase itself but in the act of naming it, of having it said aloud exactly as it might be said in an actual district office. In short, the novel’s satire operates at the level of dialogue, reproducing a genre of speech, official evasiveness, so precisely that its comic charge comes from accuracy as much as embellishment.

Furthermore, the same logic of accuracy-as-satire governs the novel's account of institutional absence rather than institutional excuse. The missing forensic laboratory, described in Chief Martins' weary reflection that "there was no scientific support to help the police solve homicide cases" (Ben-Daniels, 2013, p. 72), is not dramatized as a shocking revelation within the story; instead, it is delivered almost in passing, as background fact the characters have long since stopped finding remarkable. That flatness of delivery is, in itself, significant. The novel is not staging the absence of a forensic lab as an event, because for the characters who live inside this system, it is not an event, it is simply the ordinary condition of their work.

On the whole, this precision also explains why the novel's satire resists being a generic postcolonial dysfunction of the kind that could be relocated, with minimal adjustment, to any under-resourced bureaucracy anywhere in the world. Its targets, after all, are named with a specificity that ties them to an identifiable Ghanaian administrative reality: the reference to ECG as the institution to which blame is deflected (Ben-Daniels, 2013, p. 2), the naming of Achimota school ties as the informal currency that moves a case through the courts (Ben-Daniels, 2013, p. 174), and the tro-tro culture of the city's roads are none of them interchangeable with equivalent details from another national context. A universal account of bureaucratic dysfunction would flatten these details into a generic "developing world" backdrop. The novel, however, insists on their local specificity, and it is exactly this insistence that licenses reading the text through Postcolonial Urban Theory rather than through a placeless theory of institutional failure.

Beyond Ghana, this combination of precision and comic deflation situates *A Quarter Past Midnight* (2013) within a wider comparative field of postcolonial bureaucratic satire that has, until now, largely bypassed West Africa: Sadaf and Iftikhar's (2025) reading of Pakistani fiction, Rani and Sarkar's (2026) work on Indian institutional comedy, and Al and El-nasir's (2026) study of Nigerian satirical prose all describe versions of the same pattern this analysis has traced as comic deflection functioning as a survival strategy for both characters and readers navigating institutions they cannot trust. Notably, the absence of a Ghanaian case study in this comparative literature, noted in the literature review, is precisely the gap this reading of Ben-Daniels's novel begins to close.

4.3 Class, the Courts, and the Postcolonial City

In the narrative, institutional failure in the postcolonial city is rarely blind to wealth, exposing a judicial and spatial order in which class determines outcome as surely as the law is presumed to guarantee equality. This theme demonstrates that such unevenness operates across two related planes, one institutional and one geographic, each reinforcing the other. This discussion is accordingly organised in two connected movements: firstly, an examination of the courtroom sequence, which stages due process and its quiet undoing side by side; and secondly, an examination of the novel's spatial arrangement of the city itself, which gives that same unevenness a physical, geographic form.

Firstly, Pearl's arrest is narrated through the formal language of legal guarantee. Emmanuel reads her rights aloud, informing her that she is "under arrest for the suspected murder of Mrs. Ewura Abena Lawson," that she has "a right to remain silent," and that "if you cannot afford one, the state will provide" her an attorney (Ben-Daniels, 2013, p. 150). However, this formal moment is immediately set against its human cost: as the handcuffs go on, Auntie Ama cries out, "Savior! Savior, do something! Officer! Please listen to me, my child is very sick. She needs to be at home, with me, her mother!" (Ben-Daniels, 2013, p. 150). This juxtaposition of official procedural language with a mother's desperate, unofficial pleading previews the gap the rest of the sequence goes on to confirm: within days, that formal guarantee of state-provided counsel has already been overtaken by private means, since "by now the lawyers of Dr. Asare were doing everything possible to get her a bail," even as the arresting detective privately confesses that "his doubts had increased ever since his discussion with Serwaa, and once an officer started having doubts over an arrest, then, there was a problem" (Ben-Daniels, 2013, p. 154).

This gap between promise and practical reality is not accidental; rather, it is prepared for earlier in the novel by the introduction of Savior's law firm, whose reputation rests openly on the claim that clients are "assured to certainly win a case as long as one could afford the expensive billing hours" (Ben-Daniels, 2013, p. 69). Justice, in this formulation, is explicitly for sale before Pearl is ever arrested, which means her case does not corrupt an otherwise fair system; it simply confirms, at the level of plot, an unfairness the novel has already told the reader to expect. That expectation is confirmed a final time in the revelation that the preliminary hearing was expedited not through any legal mechanism but because "the chief justice and Pearl's mother had been school mates at Achimota in the early 50s" (Ben-Daniels, 2013, p. 174). Decades-old classroom friendships, not the law, decide the pace of this trial, a detail that quietly reframes the entire judicial process the novel has been

narrating as a network of personal debts not only a body of impartial rules.

A comparable gap, meanwhile, opens at street level rather than on the bench, which demonstrates that this unevenness is not confined to the elite courtroom. Detective Emmanuel's frustration, on discovering that "the police officer just say that he took the call for a prank and that was why he did not follow up" (Ben-Daniels, 2012, p. 167), nearly costs the investigation its earliest lead, a distress call placed on the night of the murder. The near-loss of this lead shows that institutional failure begins much lower down than Pearl's courtroom, in the routine indifference of an ordinary duty officer, and it is this same failure, at both the top and the bottom of the institutional ladder, that the section's second movement now traces onto the geography of the city itself.

Secondly, this unevenness has a spatial as well as an institutional register. Against the cultivated grounds of the Lawson estate, complete with an orchard and a man-made ornamental stream, the novel sets a very different kind of street elsewhere in the same city, where "at both sides of the rough dirt patch road were small pools of dirty water from bathrooms and kitchens" (Ben-Daniels, 2013, p. 200). Emmanuel, eating his food while trying to avoid the dirt staining his trousers, reflects on how "one could ever consider a place of convenience as a privilege," before the narration traces the condition to its institutional root: "in the past people-built homes without places of convenience because local government authorities provided toilets and bathrooms. But then, when the management of these public facilities collapsed, people found themselves left to fend for themselves" (Ben-Daniels, 2013, p. 200). This detail matters because it forecloses any reading of the neighbourhood's squalor as a natural or cultural condition. The proximity implied by the contrast between the Lawson estate and this street matters as much as the contrast itself: these are not two different cities but two neighbourhoods of one city, separated by a short drive rather than by any meaningful distance, an arrangement that gives concrete, physical form to what Krishnan (2015) and Marx (2017) describe as the mutual shaping of postcolonial space and identity. In this respect, Ajah's (2024) observation that African urban fiction keeps returning to the city as both promise and disappointment finds its clearest confirmation in a novel that places its wealthiest and its most neglected streets within the same short journey.

In sum, these bureaucratic deflection, institutional hollowness, credibility-dependent satire, and class-inflected space also make visible the five interlocking claims of Postcolonial Urban Theory introduced earlier, not as an external framework applied after the fact, however as a lens already at work within the literary analysis above.

To begin with, Myers's (2011) foundational claim, that African cities resist adequate description through Western urban models built for different histories of governance, is dramatized before the plot even properly begins. The mayor's evasive appeal to "municipal jurisdiction" (Ben-Daniels, 2013, p. 2) only registers as a failure once the reader recognises that the city's administrative boundaries are inherited colonial constructs rather than organically evolved, locally accountable structures; correspondingly, a Western urban-planning framework, built on the assumption of continuous institutional development, would have little vocabulary for a jurisdictional dispute whose real cause lies in a colonial-era map how vein any present-day negotiation.

Secondly, Evans (2023) and Nisar and Masood (2021) together supply the theory's second claim, that colonial-era administrative logics persist, altered but structurally intact, within nominally independent institutions. In this, the missing forensic laboratory and the newly acquired but functionally hollow patrol vans discussed above are not two separate failures but a single pattern repeated at different scales: institutions that retain the outward form of modern statehood, a police force, a court, a security firm, while lacking the underlying capacity that form was originally built to house. This, in other words, is the persistence-in-altered-form these scholars describe, made visible not through abstract argument but through the specific, recurring gap between an institution's appearance and its function.

In a related vein, Jazeel's (2018) insistence on views from outside mainstream urban studies find its narrative counterpart in the novel's depiction of the informal transport culture. That system, answerable to itself instead to formal traffic law, is not treated by the text as simply a governance failure to be corrected; instead, it is treated, ambivalently, as a functioning order in its own right, with its own internal logic of belonging and consequence. This is precisely the methodological point Jazeel raises against urban theory's tendency to treat only state-sanctioned urbanism as legitimate urban knowledge: the novel's tro-tro drivers are not waiting to be absorbed into formal governance, they have already built a rival system, and Postcolonial Urban Theory, unlike a purely institutionalist framework, has the conceptual room to take that rival system seriously as opposed to dismissing it as mere lawlessness.

Turning next to accountability, Rankin's (2010) ethics of accountability, the claim that reading a postcolonial city is never a neutral act but one implicated in the very power relations it describes, is tested most directly by the novel's courtroom sequence. In the novel, Judge Abena Dolphne's expedited hearing is only an

evidence of “how justice works here” would itself reproduce the flattening Rankin warns against; the more accountable reading, and the one this study has pursued, is instead to notice that the formal guarantee of legal representation recited at Pearl’s arrest is not false so much as unevenly available, present in the letter of the law and absent in its practical operation for anyone without Pearl’s resources or her mother’s Achimota connections. The theory’s demand for accountability is, in this sense, a demand of the gap between guarantee and practice as itself the object of analysis, in other words resolving it too quickly in either direction.

Finally, the theory’s fifth and central claim, that the postcolonial city is a continuously contested terrain instead of a fixed backdrop to unrelated drama, is confirmed less by the sheer geographic density of institutional detail running alongside the murder plot. Indeed, the open gutters of the city’s poorer quarters and the cultivated, ornamental grounds of the Lawson estate occupy the same fictional map as the well-resourced courts elite families can access and the resource-starved police station investigating a murder among the elite. It is this density, that any individual quotation, makes the strongest case for reading the city itself, and not only its individual characters, as the terrain on which the novel’s institutional critique unfolds. Also, this clarifies the stakes of the disagreement between Storper and Scott (2016) and Leitner and Sheppard (2016) noted earlier in the theoretical framework.

Because *A Quarter Past Midnight* (2013) institutional dysfunction is tied, as it demonstrates, to identifiable, historically specific features of Ghanaian urban administration to generic inefficiency of the kind that could be found in any under-resourced bureaucracy worldwide, which aligns Leitner and Sheppard’s (2016) defence of provincializing, particularist urban theory over Storper and Scott’s (2016) call for cross-contextual universality. After all, a universalising model could describe the novel’s dysfunction while it could not explain why the mayor mentions ECG specifically, why Achimota school ties carry the weight they do in a Ghanaian courtroom, or why the tro-tro system operates by the particular rules the *A Quarter Past Midnight* (2013) describes. Postcolonial Urban Theory, built to take such context-bound detail seriously more exactly folding it into a universal account of urban dysfunction.

5.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that Ben-Daniels’s *A Quarter Past Midnight* (2013) offers a compelling satirical interrogation of the enduring influence of colonial administrative structures within the postcolonial African city. Through a focused application of Postcolonial Urban Theory and a qualitative close reading of key bureaucratic encounters, the analysis reveals that bureaucratic dysfunction in the novel is not incidental to urban life but a central mechanism through which power, frustration, and survival are negotiated. Ben-Daniels deploys satire not only to ridicule inefficiency and institutional absurdity, but also to expose the deeper structural continuities that link colonial governance to contemporary urban experience. Importantly, the novel reimagines the city as a contested space where institutional confusion and delay shape everyday existence, compelling ordinary citizens to develop strategies of resilience, adaptability, and negotiation. In doing so, the text foregrounds the agency of urban dwellers even within constraining systems, thereby complicating simplistic narratives of victimhood. The study thus demonstrates that satire in *Quarter Past Midnight* (2013) functions as both critique and revelation, illuminating the contradictions of postcolonial modernity while documenting the lived realities of those who inhabit it. This study, therefore, establishes that *A Quarter Past Midnight* (2013) makes a significant contribution to African urban literary discourse by centering bureaucratic failure as a defining feature of postcolonial identity formation and urban survival. It accentuates the necessity of African cities not only as physical environments but as institutional landscapes shaped by historical continuities, where satire becomes a powerful tool for both exposing and reimagining the structures that govern everyday life.

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