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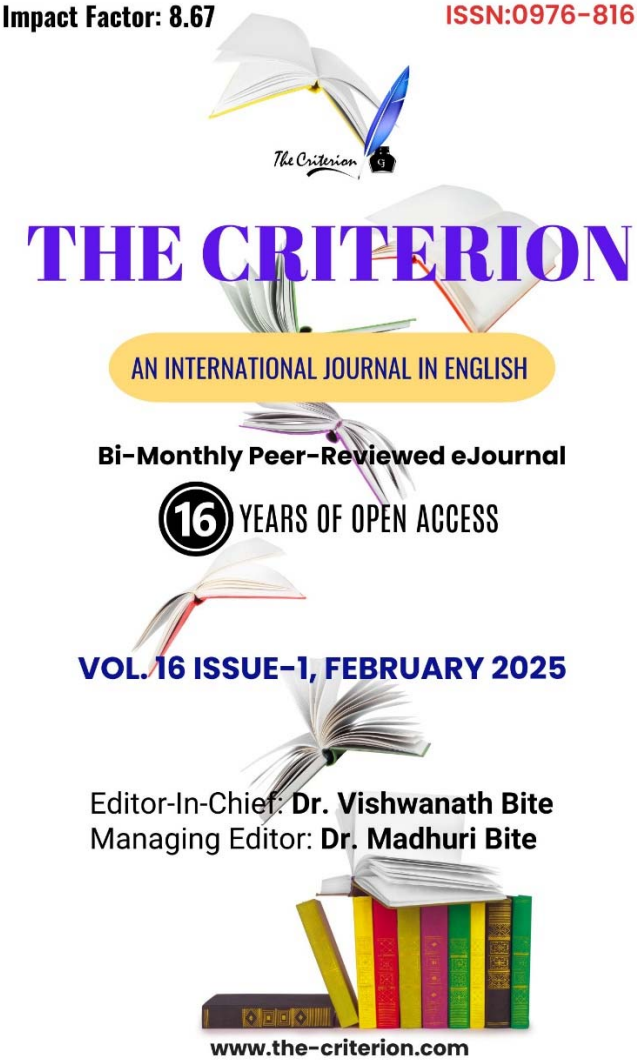

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"Othering the 'Exotic': Colonial Racism in Postcolonial Rewritings" A Comparative Study of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Dr. Kailas Maruti Pote
Associate Professor & Head,
Department of English,
Late Abasaheb Kakade Arts College,
Bodhegaon, Tal- Shevgaon, Dist- Ahilyanagar.

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Abstract:

This paper examines how colonial literature perpetuated the "othering" of non-Western cultures as exotic and inferior, and how postcolonial and African American writers reclaimed agency through counter-narratives. By analyzing Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* alongside Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the study highlights the subversion of colonial tropes. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is further explored as a response to racial exclusion in American literature, demonstrating how internalized racism perpetuates systemic oppression. The paper argues that postcolonial rewritings dismantle colonial hierarchies by centering marginalized voices and critiquing the legacy of imperialism.

Colonial literature often constructs the 'exotic' Other as primitive, irrational, and inferior to justify imperial domination. This racial Othering serves to reinforce Western superiority while dehumanizing non-European cultures. Postcolonial rewritings seek to dismantle these narratives, offering alternative perspectives that center the voices of the

colonized. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* exemplifies colonialist Othering, depicting Africa as a place of darkness and savagery. In contrast, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* reclaims the African narrative by portraying Igbo society with complexity and dignity. Similarly, Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* revisits *Jane Eyre* from the perspective of Bertha Mason, challenging the racist and patriarchal assumptions embedded in Charlotte Brontë's text. Finally, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* critiques the internalized racism perpetuated by white-dominated American literature, exposing the devastating effects of racial exclusion.

Keywords: colonial literature, Othering, Igbo society, racism, white-dominated.

Introduction

The colonial project relied on constructing the "exotic other" to justify domination, a process embedded in canonical Western literature. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) epitomizes this tradition, reducing Africa and its people to a dehumanized backdrop for European self-reflection. Postcolonial writers like Chinua Achebe and Jean Rhys challenge such narratives by recentering marginalized perspectives. Similarly, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) confronts racial exclusion in America, exposing how white supremacy infiltrates cultural identity. This paper interrogates how these works dismantle colonial racism through narrative form, character agency, and cultural reclamation.

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is one of the most controversial colonial texts, often criticized for its dehumanizing portrayal of Africans. The novel represents Africa as an enigmatic, primitive space, reinforcing the binary opposition between 'civilized' Europeans and 'savage' natives. The African characters remain voiceless and nameless, reduced to mere shadows in Marlow's imperial journey.

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Chinua Achebe, in his seminal essay "An Image of Africa" (1977), denounces Conrad's novel as racist, arguing that it strips Africans of their humanity and relegates them to the periphery of the narrative. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) responds directly to this misrepresentation by depicting pre-colonial Igbo society with depth and complexity. Unlike Conrad, who presents Africa as a backdrop for European exploration, Achebe foregrounds African agency, detailing the political, religious, and social structures disrupted by colonial rule.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) epitomizes colonialist Othering through the character of Bertha Mason, Rochester's Creole wife. Bertha is depicted as a monstrous madwoman, embodying the racial anxieties of the Victorian era. Her Caribbean heritage is used to justify her supposed instability, reinforcing the stereotype of the 'wild' colonial woman.

Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) reclaims Bertha's voice, renaming her Antoinette Cosway and narrating her tragic descent into madness from her own perspective. Rhys humanizes Antoinette, exposing the racial and gendered oppression she faces as a Creole woman caught between two worlds. The novel critiques the British colonial gaze, illustrating how European narratives silence and distort non-European voices.

While Conrad and Brontë's works exemplify colonialist Othering, American literature also perpetuates racial exclusion. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) critiques the internalized racism imposed by a white-dominated cultural narrative. The novel follows Pecola Breedlove, a young Black girl who yearns for blue eyes, believing that whiteness equates to beauty and worth.

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Morrison exposes how mainstream American literature and media construct Blackness as undesirable and Other. The novel dismantles these racist ideals by portraying the psychological damage inflicted on marginalized communities. Through its fragmented, nonlinear structure, *The Bluest Eye* mirrors the disintegration of Pecola's identity, illustrating the devastating impact of racialized Othering.

Postcolonial literature serves as a crucial site for challenging colonialist narratives and reclaiming marginalized voices. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* demonstrate how postcolonial rewritings deconstruct the racial Othering embedded in Western literature. By centering the perspectives of the oppressed, these works resist imperialist discourse and offer alternative, humanizing representations of historically Othered groups. Literature thus becomes a powerful tool for redefining identity, agency, and historical memory in the aftermath of colonialism.

Colonial Othering in *Heart of Darkness*

Conrad's novella frames Africa as a primitive, unknowable space through Marlow's voyeuristic gaze. Indigenous Africans are described as "savages" and "shadows," stripped of individuality and voice. The Congo becomes a metaphor for European moral decay, but its people remain faceless, reinforcing what Achebe calls "the desire—one might say the need—in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe" (Achebe, 1977, p. 3).

Key Example:

- Kurtz's infamous report concludes with the postscript, "Exterminate all the brutes!" (Conrad, p. 50), reducing Africans to obstacles in the colonial mission.
- Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) explains how colonial discourse constructs the "other" as inferior to legitimize domination.

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Reclaiming Agency in Postcolonial Rewritings

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958)

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* serves as a direct counter-narrative to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, challenging the latter's portrayal of Africa as a land of chaos and savagery. Achebe reclaims African agency by depicting the Igbo people as a community with deep-rooted traditions, sophisticated social structures, and rich oral traditions. Through the protagonist, Okonkwo, Achebe presents a nuanced exploration of pre-colonial African identity, resistance, and the devastating impact of colonialism.

One of the novel's central themes is the disruption of Igbo society by European missionaries and colonial administrators. While Conrad's work suggests that Africa is a "dark" and untamed place requiring Western intervention, Achebe exposes the colonial project as a force of destruction rather than civilization. The arrival of the British, rather than bringing enlightenment, fractures Igbo society, sowing discord and ultimately leading to Okonkwo's tragic downfall.

Key Contrasts Between Achebe and Conrad

- **Culture:** Achebe immerses readers in Igbo customs, from proverbs and folktales to intricate legal and religious systems, directly opposing Conrad's depiction of Africa as a cultural void. The novel's attention to language, ritual, and tradition highlights the sophistication of Igbo society, contrasting sharply with *Heart of Darkness*, which strips Africa of its history and agency.
- **Tragedy:** While Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* culminates in Kurtz's infamous final words—"The horror! The horror!"—symbolizing the moral decay of European imperialism, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* ends with Okonkwo's suicide, a final act of

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defiance against colonial domination. Okonkwo's death reflects both personal and cultural resistance to erasure, as he refuses to assimilate into the colonial system that dismantles his world.

"The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers." (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 176)

This passage underscores the gradual yet devastating infiltration of colonialism. The initial dismissal of European influence as harmless ignorance ultimately gives way to the painful realization that the Igbo community has been divided from within. Achebe captures the deceptive nature of colonial expansion, showing how cultural domination often precedes political control. Through *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe not only reclaims African identity from colonial misrepresentation but also asserts the dignity, complexity, and resilience of pre-colonial societies.

Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)

Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a postcolonial and feminist reimagining of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, offering a voice to Bertha Mason, the "madwoman in the attic." In Brontë's novel, Bertha is depicted as a violent, uncontrollable figure—stripped of her history and reduced to a colonial stereotype of the monstrous "Other." Rhys challenges this portrayal by reconstructing Bertha as Antoinette Cosway, a Creole woman from Jamaica whose descent into madness is not inherent but rather a result of oppressive colonial and patriarchal forces.

By shifting the narrative perspective to Antoinette, Rhys reclaims agency for a character previously denied subjectivity. Through her fragmented and lyrical storytelling,

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Rhys critiques the European gaze that exoticizes and dehumanizes Creole women, exposing the psychological and social conditions that lead to Antoinette's tragic fate.

Key Themes

- **Hybrid Identity:** Antoinette exists at the intersection of multiple cultural and racial identities, making her an outsider in both English and Jamaican societies. As a Creole woman of European descent living in a formerly enslaved Caribbean world, she is caught between the declining status of white Creoles and the racial tensions of post-emancipation Jamaica. Her ambiguous identity renders her vulnerable, as neither the English nor the Black Jamaican communities fully accept her. This sense of in-betweenness mirrors the broader struggles of postcolonial subjects grappling with fractured identities.
- **Voice and Silence:** In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason is voiceless—defined solely by Rochester's narrative, which frames her as deranged and subhuman. Rhys dismantles this silencing by allowing Antoinette to tell her own story, portraying her as a deeply complex woman struggling against forces beyond her control. Through Antoinette's perspective, *Wide Sargasso Sea* critiques the way colonial subjects are written out of history, much like how Bertha is erased in *Jane Eyre*. Rhys thus turns the reader's gaze away from Rochester's perspective and toward the psychological and social violence inflicted upon Antoinette.

"There is always the other side, always." (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 106)

This quote encapsulates Rhys' central argument: there is always an untold story, an alternative perspective that challenges dominant narratives. *Wide Sargasso Sea* serves as this "other side" to *Jane Eyre*, filling the gaps in Bertha Mason's history and revealing the ways

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in which colonialism and gender oppression shape individual destinies. Ultimately, Rhys' novel reclaims a marginalized figure, transforming Bertha Mason from a symbol of madness into a tragic heroine whose suffering reflects the larger consequences of empire and patriarchy.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*: Racial Exclusion in America

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is a powerful critique of internalized racism and the destructive impact of Eurocentric beauty standards on Black identity. Through the tragic story of Pecola Breedlove, a young Black girl who believes she will be loved and accepted only if she possesses blue eyes, Morrison exposes how racial exclusion operates not just through overt discrimination but through deeply embedded cultural narratives of beauty, worth, and desirability.

The novel illustrates how systemic racism functions at both institutional and psychological levels, shaping self-perception and self-worth. By centering Pecola's perspective, Morrison reveals the insidious ways in which Black individuals, especially women and girls, are made to feel invisible, undesirable, and unworthy within a white-dominated society.

Key Analysis

- **White Aesthetics and Internalized Racism:** Morrison critiques how dominant beauty standards reinforce racial hierarchy. The Shirley Temple doll, with its golden curls and bright blue eyes, serves as a powerful symbol of how Black children are conditioned to idolize whiteness. Claudia, another young Black girl in the novel, expresses resentment toward Shirley Temple, reflecting a nascent awareness of this imposed standard. Meanwhile, Maureen Peal, a light-skinned, wealthy Black girl,

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enjoys social privilege because her appearance aligns more closely with white ideals of beauty. Pecola, by contrast, is treated with cruelty and neglect, leading her to believe that acquiring blue eyes will transform her reality.

- **Fragmented Narrative Structure:** Morrison employs a nonlinear, multi-perspective storytelling approach to mirror the fractured nature of Black identity under systemic racism. The novel shifts between different voices and timelines, creating a disjointed, mosaic-like narrative that reflects the psychological damage inflicted on the Black community. This fragmentation also challenges traditional storytelling norms, reinforcing Morrison's broader critique of hegemonic cultural structures.

Morrison's critique aligns with bell hooks' argument in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), where hooks discusses how media and literature reinforce Eurocentric beauty standards that alienate and devalue Blackness. hooks argues that representation matters because images shape consciousness, and when Blackness is consistently portrayed as inferior or undesirable, it fosters self-hatred and exclusion. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's tragic yearning for blue eyes exemplifies this erasure, as she internalizes the message that whiteness equates to beauty, love, and acceptance.

"Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another—physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought." (*The Bluest Eye*, p. 122)

This passage underscores Morrison's central critique: beauty is not an objective or neutral concept but a social construct that has been weaponized to marginalize and exclude. By linking beauty with romantic love, Morrison highlights how both ideals serve as tools of oppression, dictating who is deemed worthy of love and validation. For Pecola, the belief in blue eyes as a prerequisite for acceptance is not just a personal struggle but a reflection of a

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larger societal failure that devalues Blackness. Through *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison not only exposes the painful realities of racial exclusion but also demands a reevaluation of the narratives that shape identity and self-worth

Subverting the Colonial Gaze: Common Threads

Postcolonial and anti-racist rewritings challenge the colonial gaze by reclaiming narrative control, amplifying marginalized voices, and exposing the mechanisms of cultural oppression. Achebe, Rhys, and Morrison each use literature as a tool of resistance, subverting dominant narratives that have historically misrepresented or erased non-Western and non-white identities. Though their works differ in historical and geographical contexts, they share key thematic and stylistic strategies that deconstruct colonial ideologies.

Reclaiming Language

Language is a battleground in the fight against colonialism and cultural hegemony. Each of these authors reclaims linguistic traditions that were historically dismissed or suppressed:

- **Chinua Achebe (*Things Fall Apart*)**: Achebe incorporates Igbo proverbs, folktales, and linguistic structures into an English-language novel, resisting the colonial framing of African societies as primitive or lacking literary traditions. By embedding Igbo culture within the text, Achebe forces Western readers to engage with African epistemologies on their own terms rather than through a Eurocentric lens.
- **Jean Rhys (*Wide Sargasso Sea*)**: Rhys destabilizes the authority of the English language by infusing her novel with Creole dialects and rhythms. This choice reflects the hybrid identity of her protagonist, Antoinette, and disrupts the linguistic dominance of the English colonial narrative. Creole becomes a marker of cultural

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authenticity and resistance, positioning Antoinette in contrast to Rochester's rigid, imperialist worldview.

- **Toni Morrison (*The Bluest Eye*)**: Morrison blends African American Vernacular English (AAVE) with modernist literary techniques, such as nonlinear storytelling and multiple narrative perspectives. This fusion creates a uniquely Black literary form that resists assimilation into Western literary conventions. By elevating vernacular speech and oral storytelling traditions, Morrison affirms the legitimacy of Black cultural expression.

Centering Marginalized Voices

All three authors prioritize perspectives that have been historically silenced or misrepresented by colonial or racial hierarchies:

- Achebe shifts the focus from the European colonizer to the Igbo people, revealing the internal complexities of a pre-colonial African society. Okonkwo's downfall is not the result of savagery or moral failing, as colonial narratives might suggest, but rather of the violent cultural rupture imposed by imperialism.
- Rhys reclaims Bertha Mason's story, giving her a voice and a history that *Jane Eyre* denies her. Rather than portraying her as a mere symbol of madness, Rhys presents Antoinette as a tragic figure destroyed by patriarchal and colonial forces.
- Morrison exposes the psychological impact of systemic racism on young Black girls like Pecola Breedlove, offering a devastating critique of how societal beauty standards enforce racial exclusion. Pecola's story, which might have been overlooked in mainstream American literature, is placed at the center, forcing readers to confront uncomfortable truths about race, beauty, and self-worth.

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Chromatic Symbolism: The Power of Color

Color symbolism plays a crucial role in all three works, highlighting themes of racial and cultural corruption:

- **Joseph Conrad's "Whited Sepulchre" (from *Heart of Darkness*)**: Conrad describes Brussels as a "whited sepulchre," referencing the biblical metaphor for hypocrisy—something outwardly pure but inwardly corrupt. This imagery critiques European imperialism, which claims to bring civilization while actually perpetrating exploitation and violence.
- **Toni Morrison's "Blue Eyes" (from *The Bluest Eye*)**: Pecola's obsession with blue eyes represents internalized racism and the destructive power of white beauty standards. Blue eyes become a metaphor for racial exclusion, as they symbolize a standard of beauty that Black individuals are taught to desire but can never attain.
- **Achebe and Rhys' Use of Color:** While Achebe and Rhys do not use a singular dominant color in the same way as Conrad or Morrison, they employ vivid sensory imagery to convey cultural alienation. Achebe contrasts the vibrant, earth-toned world of the Igbo with the cold, metallic presence of the colonizers, while Rhys frequently describes the lush, decaying beauty of the Caribbean, symbolizing Antoinette's fading connection to her homeland.

Conclusion

Postcolonial rewritings like *Things Fall Apart* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* dismantle the exotic "other" by restoring depth and humanity to marginalized communities. Achebe refutes the colonial myth of Africa as uncivilized, while Rhys reclaims Bertha Mason's silenced story, exposing the intersections of race, gender, and colonial oppression. Similarly,

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Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* interrogates how racial exclusion operates through cultural narratives, revealing the devastating consequences of internalized racism.

Together, these works challenge readers to reconsider the legacy of colonialism, confront ongoing racial hierarchies, and imagine decolonized futures where marginalized voices are not just included but centered. Through their use of language, perspective, and symbolism, Achebe, Rhys, and Morrison reclaim the narrative space that colonial literature sought to deny, offering powerful counter-histories that resist erasure.

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