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Tied-Up Heads versus Marble Skin

Agatha Christie’s Portrayal of Middle Eastern and African Colonised

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Tied-Up Heads versus Marble Skin: Agatha Christie’s Portrayal of Middle Eastern and African Colonised in

*The Man in the Brown Suit, Murder in Mesopotamia, Appointment with Death*, and *A Caribbean Mystery*

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Table of Contents

1 Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1
  1.1 Aim and approach .................................................................................................... 2
    1.1.1 Orientalism and Otherness ........................................................................... 2
    1.1.2 The Colonised ................................................................................................. 5
    1.1.2.1 The colonised in the Middle East ............................................................. 6
    1.1.2.2 The colonised in the Caribbean ............................................................... 7
    1.1.2.3 The colonised in Africa .............................................................................. 8
  1.2 Previous research ..................................................................................................... 8

2 The Man in the Brown Suit .......................................................................................... 11

3 Murder in Mesopotamia ............................................................................................... 15

4 Appointment with Death .............................................................................................. 19

5 A Caribbean Mystery .................................................................................................... 23

6 Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 26

7 Works Cited .................................................................................................................. 28
1 Introduction

The year 2016 was the year during which the whole world cast its eyes upon Great Britain. The referendum about ‘Brexit’ reminded us that countries are not static but dynamic institutions. The driving force behind the leave campaign was the idea “taking the country back” to its glories of the past and as a result, a colonial nostalgia appeared, a longing for the times during which the British Empire ruled the world (Andrews “Colonial nostalgia”). Yet, what did this empire look like? Until the second half of the 20th century, Britain was one of the great colonial powers with colonies on almost every continent. Even though the colonies were part of the empire, they did not have the same status as their mother country; they were ruled by Great Britain. Similarly, the native peoples were not seen as equals to the British but as inferiors.

These historic realities naturally influenced the writing of British authors – sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously. One of these authors was Agatha Christie, the “Queen of Crime” and one of the most celebrated writers of the Golden Age of detective fiction, a term that refers to the years between the two World Wars. Christie had experienced living in the mother country, living on archaeological sites in the Middle East, and travelling to other colonies (Campbell 12). Moreover, her writing career lasted over sixty years - years during which the British Empire and colonial power changed to a great extent. Starting out so huge that the sun never set in it, Britain lost much power and most of its colonies with the exception of fourteen small and powerless British Overseas Territories.

Christie’s personal experience and the political situation that she witnessed are mirrored in her literary works. She liked to send her detectives, especially her most famous one, Hercule Poirot, on holiday. Poirot, Miss Marple and Christie’s other detectives visit places like Egypt, Iraq, and the Caribbean, which either still were British colonies or under British occupation after gaining their independence during the time that the stories are set. These works give insight into how the colonies
and the colonised peoples were perceived by British, European and American people, a subject that is interesting due to its topicality. Today’s news are filled with crimes motivated by racism and racial inequality. Similar to many colonial novels, many racist acts are committed by white people who think themselves superior to people belonging to other ethnicities. How Agatha Christie deals with this subject, I will try to reveal in this essay.

1.1 Aim and approach

The aim of this essay is to find out if the African and Afro-Caribbean colonised in South Africa and the Caribbean are portrayed more positively than the colonised in the Middle East in Agatha Christie’s detective novels or if it is the other way around. Furthermore, I will consider the reasons for these portrayals. Moreover, I will look closely at the way the native characters are characterized by the non-native characters and the key characteristics that the two different groups of colonised people have in common as well as the differences between them. In order to find answers to these questions, I will use post-colonial theory to discuss four of Christie’s detective novels in chronological order: The Man in the Brown Suit, which is set in South Africa in the 1920s; Murder in Mesopotamia, which is set in 1930s Iraq, Appointment with Death, which is set in 1930s Jordan, and A Caribbean Mystery, which is set in the 1960s Caribbean.

In the following sub-sections, I will present the theoretical background for the analysis. I will start out by presenting the post-colonial concept of the Other and related theories. After that, I will continue with defining the term colonised and depicting how other researchers describe the portrayal of the colonised from the viewpoint of colonisers.

1.1.1 Orientalism and Otherness

Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin define the Other as “anyone who is separate from one’s self” (154) and in special relation to post-colonialism,
The colonized subject is characterized as ‘other’ through discourses such as **primitivism** and **cannibalism** as a means of establishing the **binary** separation of the colonizer and colonized and asserting the naturalness and primacy of the colonizing culture and world view. (154f) (original accentuation)

Othering is partly based on colonisers’ Eurocentric view of the world. They think that European culture is the natural culture and that any experience can be understood by comparison to this culture. Therefore, Europeans analyse and describe the colonised and their culture by contrasting the colonised to themselves and European culture (Ashcroft et al. 84). Anything that is different from themselves is seen as inferior and labeled as “other”.

Furthermore, Ashcroft et al. state that the colonisers thought that the subject people in the colonies “were genetically pre-determined to inferiority” (Ashcroft et al. 41), an idea taken from race theory. According to this idea, the colonised people’s inferiority was seen as natural, which was a way of justifying the often bad treatment of the colonised (41).

At this point, it has to be mentioned that not all portrayals of the colonised were entirely negative. An example of this is the concept of the “noble savage”. It originated in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *A Discourse on Inequality* and was a result of 18th century European nostalgia for a simple state of nature. Ashcroft et al. explain that “the concept creates images of the savage that serve primarily to re-define the European. The crucial fact about the construction is that it produces an ostensibly positive oversimplification of the ‘savage’ figure, rendering in in this particular form as an idealized rather than debased stereotype” (192f). This idealised description of the colonised gives an overly simplistic positive portrayal and serves as a contrast to the more complex Europeans. However, it shows that the colonisers sometimes made an effort to try to say something positive about the colonised.

The colonised’s reaction to their exposure to othering was often the attempt to become more like the allegedly superior colonisers. This process is called mimicry, which is a term used
to describe the *ambivalent* relationship between colonizer and colonized. When colonial discourse encourages the colonized subject to mimic the colonizer, by adopting the colonizer’s cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits. Rather, the result is a ‘blurred copy’ of the colonizer … [M]imicry is never very far from mockery, since it can appear to parody whatever it mimics. (Ashcroft et al. 124f) (original accentuation)

The colonised’s attempt to be more European often was not successful and gave the impression of them making fun of the colonisers. This parody might sometimes even have been deliberate.

Edward Said, one of the founders of the academic field of post-colonial studies, takes on the idea of the Orientals’ inferiority in his famous book *Orientalism*. According to him, Orientalism is “a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience” (*Orientalism* 1).

He finds also that one of the three meanings of *Orientalism* is that “[t]he Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (1), which refers to the otherness and, thereby, inferiority of the Orient.

In development of this thought, Said refers to Denis Hay, who calls “the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying ‘us’ Europeans as against all ‘those’ non-Europeans” (qtd. in *Orientalism* 7). Furthermore, Hay claims that a defining feature of European culture is the thought that European identity is superior to any other cultural identity (7).

One of Said’s most famous ideas was that the Occident, the Western world, constructed the Orient: “[t]he Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be ‘Oriental’ in all those ways considered common place by an average nineteenth century European, but also because it could be—that is, submitted to being—*made* Oriental” (5f). Thus, the Europeans could not have made the Orient Oriental if they had met more resistance.
1.1.2 The Colonised

Edward Said differentiates between two definitions of the term *the colonised*: “Before World War II, the colonised were the inhabitants of the non-Western and non-European world that had been controlled and often settled forcibly by Europeans” (“Representing” 206). Around and after World War II, the colonial situation in many colonies changed and many of them became independent but were still under the occupation of the colonising country. This development led automatically to a change of the meaning of *the colonised*. It came to stand for “a category that include[s] the inhabitants of newly independent states as well as subject peoples in adjacent territories still settled by Europeans” (206). This new definition means that the countries do not have to be colonies anymore for the native population to be considered “colonised”, but that it is sufficient that the country has been a colony earlier.

In his famous work *The Colonizer and the Colonized* from 1954, Albert Memmi, a Tunisian scholar and author, gives a picture of what colonisers thought of the, according to them, typical colonised, irrespective of ethnicity and nationality, around the time that the book was written. According to this portrayal, laziness lies in the nature of the colonised (125) and the work of one coloniser is worth that of three or four colonised (124). Furthermore, the colonised is used to his or her poverty and lacks, therefore, any kinds of desires. Nor does he feel any kind of gratitude towards the colonisers, who in their own eyes improve the life of the colonised (126). Moreover, colonisers blame the colonised quickly for criminal acts because “who but the first colonized in the vicinity can be guilty?” (134).

According to Memmi, the coloniser never sees colonised people in a positive way; only visitors from Europe and the mother country might discover something positive about the native people of the colonies. However, as soon as the visitor becomes used to the colonies, this positivity fades away and the positive features ascribed to the colonised earlier are turned into something
negative (128). Later on in this essay, it will be demonstrated that this stands in opposition to Christie’s portrayal of the visiting coloniser’s attitudes towards the colonised.

Frantz Fanon, a Martinique-born Afro-Caribbean psychiatrist, philosopher, and writer concerned with the psychopathology of colonization, states that the colonisers describe the colonised man as envious (*Wretched* 38). He claims that natives are said to have no values and that they are “the corrosive element, destroying all that comes near [them]; [they are] the deforming element, disfiguring all that has to do with beauty or morality; [they are] the depository of maleficent powers, the unconscious and irretrievable instrument of blind forces” (40). However, Fanon does not agree with this representation of the colonised. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, he stresses that the colonisers and the colonised are not seen as equals (43) and he criticises the way in which the colonisers wanted to force their culture on the colonised. This was a common practice and is called “cultural colonialism”, which is defined as “the extension of colonial power through cultural activities and institutions (particularly education and media)” (Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology).

These theories do not differentiate between colonised from different parts of the world. According to J.A. Hobson, Africans and Orientals both are “member[s] of a subject race and not exclusively … inhabitant[s] of a geographical area” (qtd. in *Orientalism* 92). It is not important that they come from different places; they are both “bearer[s] of particular, degraded ontological status rooted in race more than place” (Coburn 184).

1.1.2.1 The Colonised in the Middle East

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said talks specifically about the colonised in the so-called Orient, a term that will be discussed further later on, and he illustrates the stereotypes Westerners ascribe to Orientals. Said quotes Lord Cromer, a British colonial officer, who was stationed in Egypt, and interprets Cromer’s words as following:
Orientals or Arabs are thereafter shown to be gullible, ‘devoid of energy and initiative,’ much given to ‘fulsome flattery,’ intrigue, cunning, and unkindness to animals; Orientals cannot walk on either a road or a pavement … Orientals are inveterate liars, they are ‘lethargic and suspicious,’ and in everything oppose the clarity, directness, and nobility of the Anglo-Saxon race. (*Orientalism* 38f)

According to Said, Lord Cromer thinks that the colonised are uncivilized and lack the alleged great features of the Anglo-Saxon race. Furthermore, Said states that Westerners see themselves as “rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, [and] capable of holding real values” (49), while Arab-Orientals are said to have none of these characteristics (49). He also notes that the European image of Arabs has changed over time (286) and that this change concluded in a representation in which “the Arab is always shown in large numbers. No individuality, no personal characteristics or experiences. Most of the pictures represent mass rage and misery, or irrational (hence hopelessly eccentric) gestures” (287).

1.1.2.2 The Colonised in the Caribbean

What makes the representation of the colonised in the Caribbean complicated is its “population mélange” (Knight and Palmer, 1f), which consists of Europeans, Native Americans, Asians, and a majority of Africans. In *Paradise and Plantation: The Economy of the Caribbean Discourse*, Ian Strachan writes about the black majority in Haiti, which according to him can be seen as a representation of the situation in the Caribbean overall. He states that white tourists in the Caribbean consciously or unconsciously “may subject Caribbeans to … systematic nativization, objectification, romanticization, [and] exploitation” (14). They make them exotic at the same time as they objectify and use them. They do not see them as individuals but as a “homogenous clump” (11), even though the Caribbean consists of many different islands with different cultures and populations that originate all over the world.
Ralph Premdas notes that the picture of an “all-encompassing Caribbean identity” is fiction (2). This makes it an important aspect of literary analysis to look whether the population of the Caribbean is portrayed as a homogenous or as a heterogeneous group.

1.1.2.3 The Colonised in Africa
In Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon describes the differentiation that is made between “Negros” born in Africa and those born in the Caribbean, especially in Antilles. The former are said to be less worth and for that reason, they often pretend to be born in Antilles. The other way around, the black colonised from the Caribbean do not like to be confused with “Negros” born in Africa, because they see themselves as being closer to Europeans than Africans (Black Skin 25f).

Aimé Césaire equates colonisation with what he calls, “thingification”, which means that the colonised are seen as things instead of human beings (42). In a sarcastic tone, he presents the common thought of white people that Africans do not want freedom and therefore, they do not demand it. In other words, they like their role as subjects and would not know what to do with freedom if they would get it (60). Césaire also refers to the ethnologist Leo Frobenius’ words: “Civilized to the marrow of their bones! The idea of the barbaric Negro is a European invention” (qtd. in Césaire 53). According to Césaire, Europeans portray black Africans as barbaric, but whether he thinks that they do it because they believe what they say or because it benefits them is not commented on.

1.2 Previous research
Post-colonial criticism has not been the most frequent type of criticism applied to Agatha Christie’s work, but there are still articles that comment on the topic of her portrayal of the colonised in general or in specific works.

The most famous of these is the article The Mysterious New Empire: Agatha Christie’s Colonial Murders by Phyllis Lassner. She cites Susan Rowland, who states that Christie “exploits
Otherness to foreground Englishness” (Lassner 33), which means that she contrasts the native characters of the colonies with the English characters and makes this contrast even more clear by by emphasizing their otherness. Lassner claims that in Christie’s Oriental mysteries, it is the Europeans and Americans who define the Orient as “that Other place” (35). She gives examples of how the colonised are characterized in Christie’s works. In Murder in Mesopotamia, “the locals, they’re faceless and remain unknown” (Lassner 36). Similarly, she states that Arabs are typically mentioned only “when they can be accused of sabotaging the American-European mission” (36); when they are noticed, they are presented in a negative way. The Orientals in Christie’s work are “one-dimensional” (36); they are used to create an Oriental atmosphere for the Occidental main characters and to manipulate the reader (36).

Like Lassner, Reinhold Schiffer states in Agathas Araber that Christie’s portrayal of the difference of the oriental people can only be explained by comparing it to British values (303). In the novels, the American and European characters are prejudiced towards other nations and they express these prejudices and clichés blatantly (316). They avoid physical contact with the Orientals as much as possible (319). Schiffer also claims that Christie differentiates between the natives in her novel according to “age, social status, and ethnic affiliation” (318) (my translation). She portrays sheiks, old Arab men, and women, especially Kurdish women, positively. Tradesmen, beggars, and begging children are presented in the worst way (319). With this argument, Schiffer indicates that Christie’s portrayal of the colonised is influenced by classism. Even though Christie presents all Arabs as other, she portrays those belonging to higher classes, who have more power and money more favourably than the ones belonging to lower classes.

Both Lassner and Schiffer claim that the otherness of the Oriental colonised can be explained by a comparison to British values and characteristics, but they seem to ignore the recurring main character Hercule Poirot, who functions as a contrast to both British characters and colonised characters. He is a famous Belgian detective with wealthy friends and nevertheless, he seems to be
in the middle between Englishness and Orientalism. He is constantly compared to and ridiculed by British and American characters, but they still respect his intelligence and value him much more highly than non-Europeans and non-Americans. Belgium was a colonising country itself, but this is not mirrored in Poirot’s positive attitude and behaviour towards the colonised. It might be argued that the reason for this is that he has not lived in Belgium for a long time, but is an immigrant in England who knows how it is to be seen as different from other, larger groups.

Mevlüde Zengin’s post-colonial reading of *Death on the Nile* analyses the portrayal of the Oriental characters in the novel. According to her study, native characters are always presented negatively and “[a]s in many other oriental discourses, in Christie’s novel it is recognized that the ‘Other’ (the oriental people) is perceived by the ‘Self’ (the European) as radically different from the ‘Self’ and inherently having negative inferior qualities” (Zengin 852f). These qualities are, for example, being “irrational and backward” (853); being “simple”, “stupid”, and “uncivilized”; and being in need of Westerners help (856). Moreover, when talking about the colonised Others, Christie uses animal imagery and calls a crowd of sellers a “‘human cluster of flies’” (856). The Orientals are also portrayed as having a bad working morale, which makes them seem lazy (856). Typical adjectives in *Death on the Nile* that accompany Oriental characters are “dishonest”, “furious”, and “revengeful” (856). The reader only gets to know the natives from a Western point of view, because the natives are not given the possibility to represent themselves; they are even portrayed as unable to represent themselves (858).

The reader cannot know to what degree Agatha Christie intentionally portrayed the colonial subjects in the negative light that she did intentionally. Susan Rowland claims that a scene from *The Murder at the Vicarage* depicts the “awareness of Orientalising as a self-conscious device and the construction of English identity as overtly fictional in relation to the colonial other” (64). In this scene, typical English women belonging to the middle class are having tea with the vicar’s wife, who is consciously othered by the other women. She, however, “characterises the [other] women as
cannibals” (63) herself and invents a story about missionaries and cannibals (63). The fictional story shows that she is aware of the fact that the inequality between the English identity and the colonial identity is not natural, but consciously constructed. However, this is only one scene out of many in more than sixty detective novels and it might be argued that it is not representative of Christie’s work overall.

As there is only little previous research about Agatha Christie and her portrayal of the colonised in Africa and the Caribbean, this paper attempts to examine these groups of colonised in greater detail and compare the results that are gained to the portrayal of the colonised in the Middle East.

2 The Man in the Brown Suit

*The Man in the Brown Suit* is one of Christie’s earliest literary works. It is different from the other books that are analysed in this paper: the main character is none of her famous detectives but an ordinary girl looking for an adventure. The novel was written and published in 1924, when the British Empire was at its peak (Oxford Reference). The first half of the book is set in London, where the murder of an unidentified woman leads the protagonist and narrator, Anne Beddingfield, on a voyage to South Africa. On this trip, she hopes to find the man in the brown suit, Harry Lucas, who she believes to have information about the murder, and the actual murderer who only is known as “The Colonel”.

Despite the colonial setting of the novel, there is only little mention of the native Africans. This is commented on by the narrator herself, who notes: “By the way, I should make clear here and now that this story will not be a story of South Africa. I guarantee no genuine local colour – you know the sort of thing – half a dozen words in italics on every page” (*Suit* 184). Entirely different from the other novels is also the first reference to the colonised, which is made by Anne’s father, an English authority on Primitive Man: “‘The cradle of the race [the Neanderthals] was in Africa. They
passed to Europe —

Hence, Europeans originate from Africans, which makes them equals to some extent. However, human kind has developed since the Neanderthals and this growing up led them into different directions, which again led to the later supposed inequality. In contrast to the first thoughts about the colonised in *The Man in the Brown Suit*, in *Murder in Mesopotamia*, they are firstly described as a possible reason for mental distress (26); in *Appointment with Death*, the first natives that appear are donkey boys whose “ridiculous language” Sarah King and Raymond Boynton laugh at (16f); and in *A Caribbean Mystery*, the first Afro-Caribbean characters that appear are girls dressed in white clothes, which foreground the their dark skin that is different to the Europeans’ skin colour (24). All of these three first representations show either negative characteristics of the natives or highlight their otherness compared to Europeans and Americans.

After that statement, native Africans are mostly represented through the eyes of Anne, who is looking for an adventure and finds everything new interesting. Thus, her opinion of the natives she encounters is mostly favourable. When Mr Chichester, a criminal who disguises himself as a clergyman, tells her about his work in East Africa, Anne asks excitedly whether he had had experiences with cannibalism there (*Suit* 109). Usually, cannibalism is considered a crime and seen as barbaric but the young woman finds it interesting and exciting, which makes this representation, positive in a lurid sense. Newly arrived in South Africa, she walks around Durban and “enjoy[s] the sunlight and the black-faced seller of flowers and fruits” (186). This is a greatly favourable way of describing the natives, especially as they are mentioned in connection with fruits and flowers, which both are considered as something positive and happy. Anne and her confidante, Mrs Suzanne Blair, also find the native children that sell carved wooden toys at the train stations adorable (237). They are exotic to them; a “stimulating and exciting difference” (Ashcroft et al. 87) to what they are used to. To see something as being exotic is, on the surface, positive. Underneath, however, it is still a way of seeing something as alien. It is ostensibly a more benevolent way of othering.
Anne and Mrs Blair’s opinions stand in great contrast to the way that sellers on the street are described in *Death on the Nile* in which, as mentioned earlier, they are called a “human cluster of flies” (*Nile* 55). Even if they see the children in a positive light, Anne and Mrs Blair still do not think of them as individuals. They remain a cluster, however charming.

When Anne is attacked by one of “The Colonel’s” European henchmen, her opinion of the natives worsens because she starts to understand that she has put herself in a dangerous position and that her adventure is not all glamorous, exciting, and positive. During her delirium after the attack, she awakens several times. At one occasion, “[a] black face grinned at [her] – a devil’s face” (*Suit* 263), which indicates that her previous positive associations with the natives turn into something devilish. The face belongs to Batani, whom Harry describes to her as “loyal” and trustworthy (268). Anne’s description is less favourable; she finds her “hideous as a sin” (265) and narrates that “[o]ld Batani hovered about, counting no more than a dog might have done” (272). This utterance is an explicit announcement of the native’s inferiority and it is not the only time that Africans’ likeness to dogs is insinuated.

Sir Pedler, for example, tells that “native trekkers run about on all fours” (307); an utterance that brings the image of a dog to mind. In another one of his diary entries, he describes how Mrs Blair and Anne ask Colonel Race questions about mines. One of these questions is whether it “was … true that the natives were kept shut in compounds” (131). This reveals that the colonisers do not treat the African colonised as equal humans and it calls to mind animals that are shut into cages in a zoo, waiting to be presented as exotic sensations and to be looked at.

Furthermore, there is one recurrent adjective used in connection with the natives of South Africa: “Kafir” (188, 196, 199, 235). The word “Kafir” means literally “infidel” and was originally used for non-Muslims. However:

It also was used by Muslims in East Africa of the pagan black Africans; English missionaries then picked it up as an equivalent of "heathen" to refer to Bantus in South Africa (1731), from which use
in English it came generally to mean "South African black" regardless of ethnicity, and to be a term of abuse since at least 1934. (Online Etymology Dictionary)

This means that the term sometimes has been used in an abusive way before the year 1934. However, the context in which “Kafir” is used in the novel reveals that it is not used as “a term of abuse”. It is used to estimate the heritage of characters in the novel in an effective way at the same times as it distinguishes Africans from Europeans.

At the same time as Anne others the colonised, she differentiates between different groups of them. She is mostly ignorant of the rebellion that is happening in St. Johannesburg, but she has a clear opinion about people dying because of it. She wishes “‘that one could be sure that the right people were the ones to get killed … the ones who wanted to fight – not just all the poor people who happen to live in the parts where fighting is going on’” (Suit 367). She pities the innocent colonised that are in the way of the rebellious colonised, but she does not seem to see a reason for why the rebellion is taking place.

Towards the end of the novel, Anne notes: “I followed [Harry] as meekly as the Barotsi woman I had observed at the Falls” (375). She refers to a situation that occurred on the groups voyage from South Africa to Rhodesia: “As we went, we passed a fine native stalking along. Behind him came a woman who seemed to have the entire household belongings piled upon her head! The collection included a frying-pan” (258). This way of bearing things is entirely new and exotic to Anne, but Colonel Race explains soon that this is normal in Africa (258), implying that she will get used to the sight. The fact that she compares herself, an independent young woman, with a native woman who follows behind a man and sees a similarity between the two of them shows that her opinion of the colonised native people, at least the female ones, has changed again – in favour of them. She does not consider them other anymore but equal. She can identify with their way of living and is willing to adapt to it when she and Harry start their new life in Africa that they
plan together in the end of the novel. This is a feeling that is singular in all four of the analysed novels.

In *The Man in the Brown Suit*, the black colonised of South Africa function as contributions to an adventure; the exotic Africa replaces the renowned exotic East. The colonised are portrayed as other to Europeans and Anne’s description of them sometimes remind of animals that are looked at in zoos - exotic sensations. However, she has no understanding for their difficult situation as colonised with dark skin and romanticizes their lives to the degree that she wants to have a similar life.

### 3 Murder in Mesopotamia

*Murder in Mesopotamia* was published in 1936 and is one of Christie’s colonial interwar novels. The story is set at an archaeological dig in Iraq, a former British colony that gained its independence in 1932, but stayed under British occupation. The interwar years were the years during which the economic decline of the British Empire started (Luscombe) and with it the end of the British Empire.

Many of the characters in the novel are based on people whom the author knew in real life, whom she had met at different digs she lived at in the Middle East, and all the places in the novel are based on real places (Thomas 278). Especially interesting is that Amy Leatheran, the narrator of the story, probably is based on Christie herself. According to Thomas, this is “fairly easy to spot. Agatha, as might be expected in a semi-autobiographical book, is the narrator, the not-entirely attractive Miss Amy Leatheran” (282). An important argument in favour of this theory is that Christie worked as a dispensary nurse during World War I (282) and that she lived at archeological sites at several occasions in her life. Therefore, Amy Leatheran’s description of the Middle East might express what the author thought of it herself.
Dr Leidner, the archaeologist in charge hires the nurse Amy Leatheran because of his wife’s mental health. However, this does not prevent his wife’s murder. The archaeological expedition consists of several Englishmen, Americans, a Frenchman, and the Belgian detective Poirot, who investigates the murder. All native characters in the novel are male and work either as servants or workmen at the dig.

There are several characteristics that are ascribed to the colonised and native people, in this case Iraqis, that recur throughout the novel. One of them is criminality. Memmi notes that in the colonial context, the colonised are often seen as inclined towards criminality. Similarly, in Christie’s work, the Iraqi house-boys are the first suspects for a burglary in the house at the archaeological site. When the private detective questions all the people at the site about the murder of Mrs Leidner, he asks them who they think was the burglar. Father Lavigny answers that question with “… It might have been one of the house-boys –“ (Mesopotamia 131), while Miss Johnson does not think that one house-boy would be able to commit the burglary, but “… [p]erhaps if the house-boys were in collusion –“ (132). The natives are, however, only accused of this minor crime. When the murder is committed, they are suspects to the same extent as the non-Arab characters and the suspicions against them are soon dropped.

Something else that the European and American characters express at several occasions in the novel is that they find the Arabs untrustworthy. This opinion is not only uttered by visitors who are not used to the natives, but also by Dr Leidner, who usually has a rather positive opinion about the Arabs. At one occasion, he says: “‘Facts? Facts? Lies told by an Indian cool and a couple of Arab house-boys … Truth as truth means nothing to them. They say what you want them to say as a mere matter of politeness’” (118). Later, he even indicates that they may have been bribed to lie about what happened when the murder was committed (261). In reality, he only wants to direct Poirot’s suspicion away from himself, the real murderer, by using an argument that he expects to be easily believed: the untruthfulness of the non-British. This alleged characteristic of the colonised is
highlighted by Mrs Leidner. Her husband claims that she has a positive attitude towards Arabs, but she still tells Amy that the non-Arabs have had to come up with customs in order to prevent the Arabs from stealing. Archaeologists, for example, pay the workmen the weight of the golden objects that they discover in gold because, otherwise, they are believed to steal the objects in order to melt them down (73).

The natives are not only seen as untrustworthy, but also as possible threats. When Dr Leidner interviews Amy Leatheran and tells her about his wife’s nervous behaviour, Amy asks whether “‘she’s nervous of natives and coloured people’” (24), which implies that, in her opinion, it is plausible that someone would consider them a threat. Dr Leidner, however, answers that “’[his] wife likes Arabs very much – she appreciates their simplicity and their sense of humour’” (24). Here the concept of the noble savage comes into play. The utterance seems rather positive at first, but to be simple usually is not used as a flattery, which makes this utterance seem like a backhanded compliment.

Simplicity can be associated with stupidity, which is one of the most frequent characteristics ascribed to the Arabs. When Mrs Leidner shows Amy around at the dig, she explains how certain things work at the site. She says, “’[i]f you want [water] any other time, go outside and clap your hands, and when the boy comes say, jib mai’ har …’”, and later she adds, “’… Arabs don’t understand anything said in an ordinary ‘English’ voice’” (54). These utterances show that, according to her, the boys need some kind of special treatment. They are presented as being too stupid to understand “an ordinary ‘English’ voice” (54); they are inferior to the people from other countries that understand this way of speaking, which is considered “ordinary” from an English point of view, but might not be regarded as ordinary from an Arabic point of view.

Besides being stupid, the natives are also presented as having bad work ethic. On the dig, there is one boy who washes pots and does other similar jobs. On the day of the murder, he is left without supervision and leaves his working space in order to talk to his fellow workers. Maitland,
the captain of police in Tell Yarimjah, comments this with “… the boy, seizing his chance to be idle, strolled and joined the others outside the gate for a chat” (119), and David Emmot says: “… He had gone out to gossip with the others’” (137). Similar to Memmi’s description of assumptions about the colonised, Maitland calls the boy lazy. The interesting point about these two quotations are the different choices of words. Maitland uses the words “‘joined the others … for a chat’”, while Emmot uses the word “gossip”, which has a negative connotation. Maitland has lived in Iraq for a long time and has a more positive attitude towards the natives than the man that has lived there for a shorter period of time.

The boy, Abdullah, is the native character whom the non-native characters mention the most often. They call him condescending sounding names, like “the little pot-boy” (107), which is an simple but effective way of othering him. They also mention his singing in negative ways recurrently. His chant is called “depressing” (103) (original italics), “drowning noise” (111), and “queer nasal chant” (102). His kind of singing is a kind that the non-Arab characters are not used to; it is neither European nor American and with their Eurocentric view, they see it as inferior and Other.

This chant is also mentioned in Amy Leatheran’s description of the Arabic workmen when she first arrives at the dig:

It was the workmen that made me laugh. You never saw such a lot of scarecrows – all in long petticoats and rags, and their heads tied up as though they had toothache. And every now and then, as they went to and fro carrying away baskets of earth, they began to sing – at least I suppose it was meant to be singing – a queer sort of monotonous chant that went on and on over and over again. I noticed that most of their eyes were terrible – all covered with discharge, and on or two looked half blind. (71)

Her first impression of the natives is entirely bad. Amy finds their appearance strange; she finds their singing “queer”; she finds them scary; and she gives the impression of them being diseased. This first opinion changes slightly towards the end of the novel when she realizes:
I don’t think that up till that moment I’d ever felt any of the so-called ‘glamour of the East’. … But suddenly, with M. Poirot’s words, a queer sort of vision seemed to grow up before my eyes. I though … of merchants with long beards … and staggering porters carrying great bales on their backs held by a rope round the forehead – and women with henna-stained hair and tattooed faces kneeling by the Tigris and washing clothes, and I heard their queer wailing chants and the far-off groaning of the water-wheel.

They were mostly things I’d seen and heard and thought nothing much of. But now, somehow they seemed different – like a piece of fusty old stuff you take into the light and suddenly see the rich colours of and old embroidery … (301f)

Amy, who had the most negative attitude towards the Arabs of all characters throughout the novel, changes her mind and sees the natives in a whole new light. She suddenly understands what is meant when talking about the so-called “exotic East”, a place of mysticism, adventure, and romance. She continues to other the Iraqi colonised, for example when she uses the word “queer”, and continues to see them as greatly different from Europeans and Americans. Yet, her now romantic view is more positive, although it might be questioned how realistic this view is. This final opinion does not make up for all the derogatory and condescending hints and utterances in the novel about the colonised in Iraq, who allegedly are untrustworthy, untruthful, and lazy, but it is still worth noting.

4 Appointment with Death

Appointment with Death is Christie’s third colonial interwar novel and was published in 1938, only two years after Murder in Mesopotamia and with the same political background. The story starts out in Jerusalem and continues later in Petra, a historical and archaeological city in southern Jordan. The group of tourists that visits Petra consists of the wealthy American Boynton family, whose tyrannical matriarch is later the murder victim who dies because of her cruelty; the American Lady Westholme, the murderer of Mrs Boynton who is about to reveal the lady’s criminal past; the
American Lady Astor, who has married into British aristocracy; the French doctor Dr. Gerard; the British Sarah King; and the Belgian detective Poirot. In this interwar novel, too, there are only male native characters. They either work as servants at the dig or as guides at expeditions.

The way in which the native Jordanians are represented in *Appointment with Death* calls to mind the way the Iraqis are represented in *Murder in Mesopotamia*. Even in this novel, there is one Arab, Mahmoud, who is repeatedly described with unfavourable comments. Mahmoud is a dragoman; he guides the visitors both on the way from Jerusalem to Petra and on their trips at the site in Petra. He is repeatedly described with negative adjectives about his appearance. The narrator ascribes his “ample proportions” (*Appointment* 94) at one occasion, only a few pages later, he is called “fat and dignified” (105); and another time, he is described as “the stout dragoman” (183).

Lady Westholme is not content with his work as a guide, which she states bluntly in a conversation with Mr Poirot, after he mentions that Mahmoud had helped him with a secret plan. In her opinion, “‘[t]hat man is grossly inaccurate. [She] ha[s] checked his statements from [her] Baedeker. Several times his information was definitely misleading’” (146). Lady Westholme trusts more the information of a guidebook that was written by a European than a local. Meanwhile, Mr Poirot does the right thing by trusting Mahmoud, as his plan works. This is one of the many situations in which the Belgian detective shows sympathy for the natives and as mentioned earlier, this might be due to his familiarity with being different from the British, of which he is constantly reminded.

The dragoman is not unaware of the negative attitudes of the others towards him, which becomes clear on the one occasion he is given a voice in the novel:

[Poirot] ordered Mahmoud to be brought to him. The stout dragoman was voluble. Words dripped from him in a rising flood.

‘Always, always, I am blamed. When anything happens, say always, my fault. Always my fault.

When Lady Ellen Hunt sprain her ankle coming down from Palace of Sacrifice it my fault, though
Mahmoud is tired that he, an Arab, is blamed for every little problem, even if it clearly was other Arabs who caused the same problem. However, he is not the only Arab that is blamed for the problems that happen at the site. In a conversation between Nadine and Mr Poirot, the detective asks her who is guilty of breaking a certain bottle. She answers, “I’m not quite sure. One of the servants, I think …” (169). The Arab servants are the first suspects for minor incidents. Interestingly, they are never accused of the murder of Mrs Boynton, which, indeed, they did not commit. This reminds of the portrayal of the natives in relation to crimes in Murder in Mesopotamia. They are quickly accused of minor ones, but they are not seen as being capable of major ones like murder.

In the conversation between Mr Poirot and Mahmoud, the latter does not mention that the other Arabs are blamed for problems too. Instead, he speaks condescendingly of the Bedouins: “They are all very stupid Bedouin—understand nothing” (184). This comment indicates intra-racial discrimination, a term loaned from African-American theory that means that the members of an ethnic group discriminate against other members of the same group for reasons based on physical characteristics or cultural reasons (Race Relations). The reason for Mahmoud’s discrimination might be the cultural differences between Bedouins, who are “member[s] of any of the nomadic tribes of Arabs inhabiting the deserts of Arabia, Jordan, and Syria, as well as parts of the Sahara” (Collins English Dictionary), and settled Arabs. The dragoman’s racist attitudes are not only directed towards his fellow Arabs, but also against other ethnic groups, especially towards the Jews. In a description of the ride to Amman, “[h]e did not even mention the Jews. For which everyone was profoundly grateful. His voluble and frenzied account of their iniquities had done much to try everyone’s temper on the journey from Jerusalem” (Appointment 82f). Mahmoud is a character who shows clearly that not all Arabs are the same; they are individuals. This makes it
even more problematic that the non-Arab characters think of the natives as a homogenous group in which all members have the same characteristics and background. In addition, the fact that the Arabs are not united amongst themselves makes it seem almost impossible that Arabs, Europeans, and Americans can unite.

Sarah describes some Arabic tribes, without being specific which ones she refers to, indirectly as uncivilized: “‘Civilization is all wrong—all wrong! But for civilization there wouldn’t be a Mrs Boynton! In savage tribes they’d probably have killed and eaten her years ago!’” (89). However, in this case, she does not see that as something negative. In fact, she secretly hopes that the Europeans would be uncivilized themselves for a moment, simply to get rid of Mrs Boynton, the tyrant who bullies her children.

Despite the many negative descriptions and attitudes of the non-Arab characters towards the Arab characters, they also have a few positive and kind things to say about them. In a scene in which Sarah is the focaliser, she gives a description of a native servant’s appearance:

He wore khaki breeches, much patched, and untidy puttees and a ragged coat very much the worse for wear. On his head the native headdress, the cheffiyah, its long folds protecting the neck and secured in place with a black silk twist fitting tightly to the crown of his head. Sarah admired the easy swing with which he walked—the careless proud carriage of his head. Only the European part of his costume seemed tawdry and wrong. (89)

Sarah appreciates and even admires the native clothes that the servant wears and the way they make him walk. She is only disturbed by the European pieces that are matched with them. These European clothes are an indicator of the Arabs position as a colonial subject and mimicry, but Sarah does not want the exotic Jordanian to become more European. Her reaction can be interpreted as if she feels like the way in which the servant mixes European and Jordanian clothes is a parody of the European culture because he does not wear the Western clothes in the right way. Sarah describes him also as looking proud, but does not clarify whether she believes that this is caused by the European clothes he is wearing or by something else.
Colonel Carbury, who has lived in the Middle East for some time, shares Sarah’s partial admiration for the Arabs. He is impressed by the Bedouins “who can get out of a car in the middle of a flat desert, feel the ground with his hand and tell you to within a mile or two where you are. It isn’t magic, but it looks like it” (114). He expresses his admiration without any restrictions.

The Arabs in Appointment with Death are mostly presented in negative ways and their alleged inferiority and otherness is made clear. Positive comments are generally made by people who have live in the Middle East for a longer period of time and, therefore, have a better cultural understanding than visitors. This stands in opposition to Memmi’s statement that visitors have a more positive attitude towards natives than Europeans that live in a colony. The mixture of European and Arab qualities is portrayed as something negative; the Europeans want to keep a distance between them and the Arabs, even though they partly admire them. Unlike both The Man in the Brown Suit and Murder in Mesopotamia, in this novel, a native gets a voice for the first time. He utters his unhappiness about the way he is treated at the same time that he talks badly about fellow Arabs and Jews, other peoples in a subject position.

5 A Caribbean Mystery

A Caribbean Mystery was published almost three decades after the ones set in the Middle East, in 1964, and after the terminal decline of the British Empire that began with World War II (Luscombe). The setting is now the fictional, paradise-like Caribbean island St. Honoré. The political state of this island is not known, but it is implied that it is either a British colony or that it used to be one. In the novel, Miss Marple is on holiday on St. Honoré during which Major Palgrave, an elderly guest who recognises Tim Allerton as the murderer of whom he has a picture in his wallet, is murdered.

There are only few Afro-Caribbean characters in the novel and it is they who are considered the colonised in A Caribbean Mystery, because, as mentioned earlier, Africans have constituted the
biggest part of the population since the beginning of slavery on the islands, which in some way makes them doubly colonised. The novel focuses on one black character in particular: Victoria Johnson. She is an Afro-Caribbean maid who believes Major Palgrave’s supposedly natural death to be murder and dies as a consequence of her blackmail of the murderer.

Victoria is only characterized positively in connection to her looks. She is described as “a magnificent creature with a torso of black marble such as a sculptor would have enjoyed … [who runs] her finger through her dark, tightly curling hair” (Caribbean 64). Marble is an expensive material just as the works of sculptor are something luxurious. Therefore, this wording makes Victoria’s beauty feel luxurious as well and it ascribes her high value. The detailed description of her hair brings her origin back to mind and in connection to her skin tone, it gives the perfect picture of “the exotic Other”, which is someone that is inferior but interesting and appealing due to his or her differentness. Her position as an inferior is highlighted by the word “creature”, which has an inhuman connotation.

Another detail about Victoria and her current husband that is noted several times are their white and beautiful teeth (Caribbean 64, 81). White teeth indicate good health and that someone takes care of him- or herself. In consideration of the history of slavery on the islands in the Caribbean, the white teeth might mean that the position of the African population has improved. The beautiful teeth also leave a favourable impression of the African characters and remind the reader of the race, because the white teeth stand out from the black faces.

Despite of the positive description of their appearance, the European and American characters’ attitudes towards Victoria and the other Africans are not as positive in other regards. Africans have, for example, the lowest-ranked jobs in the hotel: “The dining room service [is] mostly done by women, tall black girls of proud carriage, dressed in crisp white” (24). The slightly better positions are filled with Europeans, such as an Italian headwaiter, a French wine waiter, and a
Swedish lifeguard. The description “proud carriage” reminds of Sarah King’s description of the Jordanian servant in *Appointment with Death*.

Victoria tells her boss, Tim Allerton, that she believes that the pills in Major Palgraves bathroom were not his. It is because of those pills for high blood pressure that the police think that the Major died of a natural death and do not discover the murder at once. They think that he died due to a mistaken dose of heart medicine. When Tim learns about Victoria’s theory, he calls her “silly” (77) and “sensational” (79). He does not take her seriously and explains this by her being from St. Honoré but, of course, he is the one who murdered the Major and has to make people think that Victoria’s idea is ridiculous. He does this by exploiting negative stereotypes, just like Dr Leidner does in *Murder in Mesopotamia*. Daventry, who has lived at St. Honoré for some time, supports Tim’s plan indirectly by describing the people from St. Honoré as “excitable” and “emotional” people, who “[w]ork themselves up easily” (107).

More cultural differences are explained by Miss Marple, who mostly has a favourable opinion of Victoria and usually does not see the cultural differences as something bad, but as something that takes time to get used to. Miss Marple thinks that it is a pity that the native people from St. Honoré seldomly get married to their partners and is supported in her opinion by Canon Prescott (38). Her worry is confirmed by Victoria, who thinks of the man that she lives with as her “present husband” (65). Miss Marple is also the one who defends Victoria in some way after she is killed as a consequence of the blackmail: “‘She mayn’t have thought of it as blackmail … In these large hotels. There are often things the maids know that some people would rather not have repeated … The girl possibly didn’t realize at first the importance of what she knew’” (167f). Miss Marple does not think the blackmail was something caused by Victoria’s heritage but something any maid might do. However, she portrays Victoria as being naïve and talks about her as though she were a child who could not understand what she got herself into. This impression is left at several other occasions in the novel, especially when Victoria is repeatedly called “girl” (142, 147, 164) instead of “woman”.
The visitors of the hotel feel generally sorry for Victoria after her death. She is called “wretched girl” (142, 147) several times. Some of them still look for reasons to make her death her own fault. One of them is Mr Rafiel: “This island girl gets herself knifed … Might be ordinary enough. That chap she was living with might have got jealous of another man – or he’d got himself another girl and she got jealous and they had a row. Sex in the tropics. That kind of stuff …” (164). He gives not only a possible explanation for a self-inflicted death; he also takes a dig at the people from St. Honoré whom he portrays as cheaters, violent, and emotional.

The last notable point is that Afro-Caribbeans are presented as a people of whom Europeans might be afraid. Tim Allerton, for example, explains his wife’s nervousness and psychological state of mind with her being in the West Indies: “… maybe she’s a bit nervy. Coming out here to the West Indies. All the dark faces. You know, people are rather queer, sometimes, about the West Indies and coloured people” (133).

Unlike the Arabs in Christie’s Middle Eastern novels, Afro-Caribbeans are described as exotic beauties and they are treated with more respect. These differences might be caused by the lack of female characters in the Middle Eastern novels. The female non-European character in A Caribbean Mystery even becomes a main character with a voice. This status gives the Afro-Caribbean Victoria both more influence and power. As the colonial situation had changed a lot since the publication and setting of the other three novels, it is not apparent whether this slightly better portrayal of the colonised is due to the geographical setting, a Caribbean island, or a different view on the colonised at the end of Britain’s colonial era.

6 Conclusion

The analysis of these four novels that were written over the course of forty years shows that there are few differences but many more similarities between the portrayal of Africans and Afro-Caribbean colonised on the one hand and Middle Eastern colonised on the other hand.
The characteristics that all of them seem to have in common are that they are not seen as individuals but homogenous groups; they are always the first suspects for minor crimes; they are untrustworthy and untruthful; and they are threats that people might be afraid of. They only have bad characteristics in common, except for their exoticism, which also has a negative aspect to it. Other bad characteristics that only are ascribed to Middle Eastern natives are a bad work ethic and laziness, followed by the even worse accusation of being uncivilized. African natives are frequently compared to animals, while Afro-Caribbean colonised are described as silly, sensational, emotional, and childish. Singular, positive utterances about all colonised are mostly made by Europeans who have lived in the colonies for some time and have got to know them, but these occur too seldom to leave a more positive feeling about the natives behind. Christie does not portray these Europeans more positively than the Europeans who have a more negative attitude towards the colonised, which implies that the opinion of the colonised is not a crucial factor for whether a character is considered good or bad in a moral sense. Even though two of the murderers in the four novels use negative stereotypes in order to avert suspicion, innocent characters like Amy Leatheran believe in similar stereotypes. One exception is Poirot, a character with a good moral who tries to solve murders. He even trusts the colonised to the extent that he asks one of them for help.

Victoria Johnson is the one character who leaves the impression that African and Afro-Caribbean colonised are portrayed more positively than the Arab colonised. In her, the only difference between the two groups that is worth mentioning is shown: the exotic beauty with flawless skin and beautiful white teeth standing out from a black face. However, this is only one feature that is ascribed to one single character, which makes the African and Afro-Caribbean lead in the competition for the better portrayal through the eyes of the colonisers a slight one.

One reason for this slightly more positive portrayal might be that Christie does not want to destroy the image of the Caribbean as a paradise. Another reason might be that the colonies in the Caribbean are a sensitive topic, as there still existed British Overseas Territories in this
geographical region. However, Christie’s motives for her portrayal of the Caribbean and its population is difficult to determine with only one single book as a basis. Therefore, this topic might be an interesting one to do further research on in more of her stories that are set in the Caribbean.

7 Works Cited


