The Other from a Colonial and a Postcolonial Perspective

Comparing Othering in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Paradise.*

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Abstract

In this essay the use of othering in the novels *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad and *Paradise* by Abdulrazak Gurnah is compared. The comparative reading is carried out through the lens of a postcolonial framework comprising thoughts and ideas of, among others Edward Said and Ania Loomba. The analysis of this essay shows that while the othering in *Heart of Darkness* is based on an ideologically motivated conception of European superiority resulting in racism, the othering in *Paradise* is based on the status levels in the precolonial East Africa, where in the end economic wealth, culture and religion decided everyone’s position within the system.

**Keywords:** Othering, racism, colonialism, *Paradise*, *Heart of Darkness*, xenophobia, fear.
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Introduction

Most of Africa was colonised by European powers during the last decades of the 19th century. A large area, that today is the Democratic Republic of the Congo, was then the personal colony of the Belgian king Leopold II. Reports of how indigenous people in this area were abused by the European colonists triggered one of the first international debates about the consequences of European colonialism in Africa (Hochschild 253–270). In the middle of this debate Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness* (1902), set in the same area, attracted attention. This book, however, did not focus on how the colonised were abused but rather on the effects the colonisation could have on European colonists. The story follows the English sailor Marlow, travelling up along the Congo River, to find the successful ivory trader Kurtz, about whom his European superiors have received worrying reports. Conrad wrote from a clearly colonial perspective and did not attempt to let his readers identify with anyone from the indigenous people, although he definitely did not create a positive image of European colonialism either. In his book *Kung Leopolds vålnad* (1998), Adam Hochschild presents Conrad as a fierce critic of the conditions in the Belgian king’s colony, but also as a supporter of the British Empire. Hochschild describes *Heart of Darkness* as the most magnificent literary portrait of the Europeans’ scramble for Africa, although he admits that Conrad’s book also is full of Victorian racism (Hochschild 192).

After World War II the European colonial empires started disintegrating and by 1994, when Abdulrazak Gurnah’s novel *Paradise* was published, the continent entirely consisted of independent African states. In this time, Gurnah, himself born on the East African island of Zanzibar, now a part of Tanzania, told a story set in partly the same area as Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. The protagonist in Gurnah’s novel is the teenage boy Yusuf who is accompanying an Arab merchant on his travels. The story is also set almost 20 years later than *Heart of Darkness* and Yusuf’s adventures take place shortly before World War I. The novel is set in an East African society where life was successively changing completely due to the arrival of the European colonists. It is an example of postcolonial literature as defined in the introduction to the book *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*: “What each of these literatures has in common . . . is that they emerged in their present form out of the
experience of colonisation and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power”. (Ashcroft et al 2). In *Paradise* Gurnah portrays this tension at a moment in time when the old society still remains, but is being undermined by the growing influence of a colonial power, in this case Germany.

The biggest differences between the two novels, however, are the perspectives from which the stories are told. Marlow, the principal narrator in *Heart of Darkness*, is telling a story, characterised by a sense of fear, about his first visit to another continent. Marlow’s perspective is also affected by him being an Englishman who has grown up accustomed to taking British colonialism for granted. Yusuf, the protagonist in *Paradise*, is also travelling into unknown territory but is himself born in East Africa and is taking in everything that happens to him with an open sense of curiosity. Yusuf is much more interested in “the other” than Marlow is. His perspective is affected by his youth and lack of experience. While Marlow in many ways is guided by European colonial presuppositions about Africa, Yusuf is successively learning new things from what he sees on his journey and from what he hears of others that have travelled the same way before.

Like with Marlow, presuppositions about the areas and people the Europeans were taking control over seem to have affected how they acted during the colonial era. European prejudices about Africa seem to have formed many of these presuppositions. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said defines the phenomenon that is both the title and the subject of his book, as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). Although Said’s book focuses on the countries in North Africa and the Middle East, a similar attitude characterised European colonialism in the rest of Africa. This is confirmed by Ania Loomba in her book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* where she states that “mediaeval Christian associations of blackness with sin and dirt were put to new use during the seventeenth century because they provided a justification for colonising and enslaving blacks” (83). In their books both Said and Loomba are showing how the Europeans were othering people in the colonies in ways that had deep historical roots connected to European culture and religion.
Being a classic, there has of course been much research on *Heart of Darkness*. It has often concerned colonialism, imperialism and racism in Conrad’s novel. Other works have studied different aspects of the story or compared *Heart of Darkness* with other novels, contemporary or of later date, but I have found only one other comparison between the two novels that I have studied. J U Jacobs describes in his paper “Trading Places in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Paradise*” (2009) Gurnah’s novel as providing “a narrative reversal and revision of Conrad’s colonial gaze from a postcolonial position” (77). He has however focused on the historical context and the intertextual relationship between the two novels. Only in a short section of the paper is Jacobs addressing the subject I have chosen – that of othering. He does this by quoting a magazine article by Elizabeth Maslen where she points out that the construction of otherness is a “necessary means of self-construction” (Jacobs 85). But Jacobs is nowhere comparing the different types of othering in the two novels, which is what I intend to do.

As mentioned above there are many studies comparing *Heart of Darkness* with other novels, for example “Ideology and Infection in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*” (2008) where Kyle Long states that “Marlow decivilizes the physical characteristics of the other by envisioning them as masks filled with ‘wild vitality’ rather than humanity” (Long 45). In his work Long finds that Marlow is regarding Africans as not yet evolved enough to be seen as men. There is also Alhassan Bundu-Conteh’s “Otherness and Imperialism in *Things Fall Apart* and *Heart of Darkness*” (2014) where a novel by Chinua Achebe, one of Conrad’s fiercest critics, is compared with the target of Achebe’s criticism. Bundu-Conteh finds that “the only reasonable conclusion that one can elicit from these descriptions is that Conrad is a dyed-in–the-wool racist who is really not interested in the plight of the Africans” (78), while Achebe “weaves a political and cultural narrative which places Okonkwo and other characters at the epicentre of the colonial encounter” (81). Achebe’s novel is set in the Igbo society (today a part of Nigeria), which was more homogenous than the multicultural society of East Africa described in Gurnah’s *Paradise*. There are not many academic works concerning *Paradise*. Many more scholars have focused on Gurnah’s novel *By the Sea*. There is however an article that is comparing *Paradise* with
the novel *A Bend in the River*, by V S Naipaul, another Nobel Prize winner. In her paper “Gurnah and Naipaul: Intersections of Paradise and A Bend in the River” (2015) Fawzia Mustafa also mentions Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as a natural reference point for both Gurnah’s and Naipaul’s novels. *A Bend in the River*, published in 1979, is also set in a similar geographical environment as *Paradise* and *Heart of Darkness*, but in a postcolonial Africa. But like Jacobs, Mustafa focuses mostly on the historical and intertextual context of the two novels she compares.

More concerned with naming and identity are three papers on *Heart of Darkness* that I have also read. Among them, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe’s 1975 lecture “An Image of Africa. Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” is probably the most debated. In the lecture he challenged the reputation of Conrad’s novel as a great work of art by giving many examples of how Conrad “managed to sidestep the ultimate question of equality between white people and black people” (Achebe 20). I intend to use some of Achebe’s analysis of Conrad’s novel in my comparison of it and Gurnah’s novel. I will do this partly in dialogue with Dorothy Trench-Bonnet’s paper “Naming and Silence. A Study of Language and the Other in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” (2000) in which she is defending Conrad against Achebe’s charges of being “a thoroughgoing racist” (Achebe 21). I will also consider the findings of Agata Kowol in “‘It Seemed Somehow to Throw a Kind of Light on Everything About me – and into my Thoughts’ – Knowledge of the Self and the Other in *Heart of Darkness*” (2014). She has done a psychological analysis of Conrad’s novel.

First and foremost I will compare the language of othering used in my two primary texts. By comparing the uses of words like “nigger” and “savage” in the two novels and analysing the context in which they are used I intend to show how the different perspectives of these two stories make one of them excluding most of the characters in the novel and the other including them. The sense of fear that is characterising *Heart of Darkness* makes it hard to identify with anyone other than the narrator Marlow, for whom everyone he meets is “The Other” and the only one of them that he is really interested in is the mysterious Mr Kurtz. In *Paradise*, on the other hand, the curiosity of Yusuf makes him interested in almost every person he encounters.
Othering occurs frequently in both novels, but the diverse perspectives of the protagonists in the two novels make them very different. In this essay I will argue that in both novels the world is portrayed in terms of us and them or the self and the other. However, while the othering in *Heart of Darkness* is formed by the theories of European superiority, the othering in *Paradise* is mostly a result of the hierarchy within the pre-colonial society that Gurnah explores from his postcolonial perspective. But I will also argue that there is a sense of fear in both novels which is also expressed in different ways. The Europeans in *Heart of Darkness* fear that their, in their own eyes, superior civilization is threatened by the barbarity of the indigenous people in the Congo. The colonised Africans in Gurnah’s novel, on the other hand, sense the lethal threat that the European colonists represent.

**Theoretical framework**

Edward Said has stated that the subject of learned Orientalists was “not so much the East itself as the East made known, and therefore less fearsome, to the Western reading public” (60). In the same way, 19th century British colonial literature played a large part in making the thought of the Empire and its British servants controlling foreign people and cultures seem as something natural. In her book *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature* (2005) Elleke Boehmer has pointed out that literature offered “home audiences a way of thinking about exploration . . . by drawing on familiar books such as the Bible or Pilgrim's Progress (15). In this way “the essential relationship, on political, cultural and even religious grounds, was seen . . . to be one between a strong and a weak partner” (Said 40). Through literature, European colonialism was introduced as something natural, both in adventure stories set in the colonies and in novels set at home where colonialism played a part as a prerequisite for the events in the stories. In the end, as Said has stated in *Orientalism*, “Western power over the Orient is taken for granted as having the status of scientific truth” (46). Said’s claim does not only apply to the Muslim Orient, but to all colonized societies without a white settler majority. During the colonial era, the Western colonialists thought of themselves as having been given the responsibility to bring civilization to the inferior people of the world. This was done by politicians, missionaries and authors throughout the colonial period.
However, at the end of the 19th century, events like the Boer War and later, two World Wars, changed the European self-image of being a governing race. Boehmer mentions Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as an example of imperial self-confidence giving way to a “self-consciousness about the damaging losses involved in empire” (Boehmer 32). But this self-doubt was not expressing any understanding for the colonised, but rather a fear of “going native”, a term described by Loomba as potentially unhinging and one of her examples is Kurtz who in *Heart of Darkness* is seduced into madness by the primaeval African jungle. Because of European fears of identifying with the colonised, the colonialist narratives remained “empty of indigenous characters” (Boehmer 62). For them to be introduced, there would have to be a change of perspective.

Although there were some indigenous authors from the colonies before the decolonization started after World War II, it was mostly during and after that process that post-colonial literature appeared. Boehmer defines postcolonial literature as writing that tries to “resist colonialist perspectives” (3). She also claims that decolonization demands “a reshaping of dominant meanings” (3) and that postcolonial literature has been a part of the process where “colonised people seek to take their place” (3). A starting assumption that Boehmer shares with Edward Said is that “cultural representations were central first to the process of colonising other lands, and then again to the process of obtaining independence from the coloniser” (5). *Paradise*, the book by Abdulrazak Gurnah that I have examined, was written by a Tanzanian in exile, a long time after the colonial power had left his homeland, but in his novel he is recreating a part of its precolonial history. Gurnah is doing this without idealising the situation in early 20th century East Africa. He describes a society divided by class, culture and religion and for a long time plagued by the Arab slave trade. As the Swedish historian Dick Harrison has shown in his book about the history of slavery, many merchants, often living on the island of Zanzibar or in towns on the East African coast, had for centuries bought slaves from the African continent and shipped them to customers in the Islamic world. Harrison has described how racism among Arab slave traders often made them ignore that enslavement of other Muslims was forbidden in Islamic law (Harrison, 353–60). The Arab slave trade was also used by Europeans as a means of justifying the
colonisation. Slavery became outlawed but the Europeans found other ways of exploiting the indigenous population. Even though the Europeans were not the first to be racists in Africa, their way of othering those who they colonised was still different because it was more ideologically motivated than the racism of Arab slave traders. Unlike the European colonists the Arab traders collaborated a lot with Africans and intermarriages between people from different ethnic groups were not unheard of. Many of the slave traders, among them the infamous Tippu Tip, was of Afro-Arab origin (Harrison 343). In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said describes how knowledge about the Orient was produced as a kind of ideology for European colonial power. In this ideology the Oriental was always the opposite of what the European was, barbaric instead of civilised, irrational instead of rational, lazy and not hard working and so on.

The above mentioned ideology is also described by Ania Loomba in her book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* where she points out that “this dialectic between self and other . . . has been hugely influential in subsequent studies of colonial discourses in other places – critics have traced it as informing colonial attitudes towards Africans, Native Americans, and other non-European peoples” (64). European colonialism was justified all around the globe by Western concepts of a superior civilisation that had evolved much further in Europe than in the rest of the world. In that way all non-Europeans were the other and falling short of all Europeans who considered themselves as constituting the norm of humanity. Boehmer finds that the “the concept of the other … signifies that which is unfamiliar and extraneous to a dominant subjective, the opposite or negative against which an authority is defined” (21). By recognizing the values of the colonists, but not those of the colonised – the other – the home audience could find colonialism to be a natural, if not a God-given mission. And Said has found that “the construction of identity… involves establishing opposites and “others” whose actuality is always subject to continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from ‘us’. Each age and society re-create its ‘Others’” (332). There are of course “others” in every society, people who act differently than those regarding them as “others”. But the main difference between my two primary texts lies in the size of the divide between us and them in both novels. In *Heart of Darkness* this divide between Europeans and Africans is so big that the real horror for Marlow and the other
Europeans searching for Kurtz is that he has gone over to the other side of the divide. In *Paradise*, on the other hand, people living in Africa with different ethnicity, culture, class or religion are admittedly “othering” each other, but not with the kind of superiority that is expressed by the European colonists. Ania Loomba has stated that “the definition of civilisation and barbarism rests on the production of an irreconcilable difference between black and white, Christian and heathen infidel, self and other” (72), but to me this difference seems more irreconcilable in *Heart of Darkness* than in *Paradise*, where people are at least trying to understand the strange European colonists.

**The use of othering terms in both novels**

The irreconcilable difference mentioned by Loomba is often a result of othering. The most common term used for othering people in both novels is “savage”, but it is used in different ways. In Conrad’s novel it is consistently uttered by European characters about Africans that are never given names by the author and only uttering words on two occasions in the novel. The first is when one of the Africans aboard the steamer asks Marlow to catch the man whom they have just heard screaming in the fog. When Marlow asks him what they want to do with that man if he was caught, the man, who Marlow already considers to be a cannibal, answers “Eat’im” (Conrad 51). The other is when “the manager’s boy put his insolent black head in the doorway, and said in a tone of scathing contempt – Mistah Kurtz - he dead”(Conrad 91). The lack of real dialogue between Europeans and Africans in *Heart of Darkness* indicates how broad the divide is between the two groups and Conrad is only conveying the European’s interpretation of the events. In these two cases Marlow finds his prejudices confirmed about the African crew on the steamer being cannibals and the news of Kurtz’s death is announced in a way he finds disrespectful. Marlow’s conclusions about the Africans are drawn based only on his prejudices.

In *Paradise*, however, the word “savage” is used by African, Indian or Arabic people living in Africa to name people in the interior of the continent that are considered less civilised than the tradesmen who use the word. In both novels, the word savage is used in a derogatory way, but in *Paradise* it is not a question of skin colour but of culture, religion and tradition. In *Heart of Darkness*, on the other hand, skin colour is often the
reason for using derogatory terms. The most common of them all – “nigger” – is used frequently in Conrad’s novel, but never by Gurnah in his novel. Other skin-connected terms used by Conrad are black fellows, black men, black shapes, black shadows, black figures and blacks.

While xenophobia in Paradise stays on a level that is not racist, the European characters in Heart of Darkness expresses a superiority of a kind described by Said in Orientalism: “Being a White Man was therefore an idea and a reality. It involved a reasoned position towards both the white and the non-white worlds” (227). And a few lines further down on the same page Said describes this position as a “culturally sanctioned habit of deploying large generalisations by which reality is divided into various collectives: languages, races, types, colours, mentalities, each character not being so much a neutral designation as an evaluative interpretation” (227). There are many situations in Heart of Darkness where the Europeans think of themselves as superior to the indigenous population, the most obvious being the part where Marlow is comparing himself with them: “Well, you know, that was the worst of it, the suspicion of their not being inhuman . . . the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly” (Conrad 45). In this passage Marlow expresses his sense of superiority connected to a fear that he, like Kurtz, could fall back to the primitive stage that he places the Africans in. This opens for a question if Marlow with such an attitude expresses racism or social Darwinism – a belief in Europeans being the most developed race and therefore the most fit to survive. However, Conrad’s novel is not at all concerned with possibilities of development in Africa, but rather with the risks of Europeans living among Africans.

Othering because of racism in Heart of Darkness

The othering in Heart of Darkness is clearly racist and based on an ideology of European superiority, but also on a fear that this position could be threatened by living among the barbaric blacks. Considering this anxiety among European colonists, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe delivered his famous lecture “An Image of Africa. Racism in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness” in 1975 at the University of Massachusetts and it was later published in The Massachusetts Review. In the lecture Achebe stated that
“the West seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant reassurance by comparison with Africa” (25). His point is that to Europeans the people of Africa remained in a stage of primordial barbarity that they themselves had risen from through the centuries of civilisation. Therefore, Europeans are warned to avoid Africa in order to safeguard their integrity, something that the mysterious man that Marlow is trying to find in *Heart of Darkness* did not do, as Achebe sums up the message of the book: “[Mr Kurtz] should have heeded that warning and the prowling horror in his heart would have kept its place, chained to its lair”. (25) What Achebe points out here is evident in *Heart of Darkness*. The darkness that all Europeans in the novel fear is the uncivilised barbarity of the blacks. They are not concerned with the abuse the indigenous population have been exposed to by Mr Kurtz, but about the fact that the same Kurtz, one of their own, has set himself up as a tribal leader that allows himself to be worshipped by his subjects. Marlow, Kurtz and the other Europeans in the novel are not portrayed as good heroes, but they are at least given some characteristics and words and are not reduced to a menacing background as the blacks are. In his lecture Achebe says that students of *Heart of Darkness* have told him that Conrad was not concerned with Africa, but with the deterioration of one European mind and that Conrad is “less charitable to the Europeans of the story than he is to the natives” and “that the point of the story is to ridicule Europe’s civilising mission in Africa” (21). Achebe’s answer is that this is partly his point: Conrad is in his novel using “Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as a human factor” (21). Achebe means that Conrad is othering the whole indigenous population by not letting any African act as an individual in the story. Instead, most of them stay in the background and the few exceptions are not portrayed as any positive examples. In this way, Conrad lets Marlow describe his relationship to the native man managing the boiler on the steamer: “to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs” (46). This is a clear case of racism where Marlow compares a man with an animal.

One of the critical works defending Conrad against Achebe’s accusations about racism is Dorothy Trench-Bonnet’s article “Naming and Silence: A Study of the Language and the Other in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*”. She has counted the number of times the
word “nigger” is used in Conrad’s novel and finds that it is only used about Africans who has been victims of abuse. Trench-Bonnet claims that “the abusive language… is an integral part of the abusive situation” (84). Although Trench-Bonnet is of course correct in pointing out that using words like nigger at the time made it acceptable to exploit people. However, in the novel the word is mostly used by the narrator Marlow, who is critical of the abuse committed by the colonists he encounters, but still he does not express any sympathy or understanding for the oppressed Africans. Trench-Bonnet claims that Heart of Darkness “is filled with unreliable narrators” (84) and that “no one in the book understands anyone else” (86). Whereupon she asks: “can the muteness of the African characters really be seen as a sign of their inferiority as Achebe suggests” (86). And later in the paper she states “The Africans in Heart of Darkness can be trusted precisely because we never really hear them. Truth, in Conrad’s works, is never what we are told by the characters. It is always what we actually see” (Trench-Bonnet 86). I must say I am not really convinced by Trench-Bonnet’s argumentation, because all the Africans remain the others throughout the novel. Nowhere in the novel is Conrad actually crossing the border between us and them.

The only “other” that Marlow tries to understand is the mysterious Kurtz. In her paper “It Seemed Somehow to Throw a Kind of Light on Everything - and into my Thoughts. – Knowledge of the Self and the Other in Heart of Darkness”, Agata Kowol sees Heart of Darkness as an “inquiry into man’s hold and loyalty to the broadly defined heritage of civilization” (96). If Conrad in his novel is conducting such an inquiry it seems that he is drawing the line between civilization and barbarity between Europeans and Africans. At least he is not allowing anything of the African civilization that is presented in Gurnah’s Paradise to become visible in his novel. The Africans in Conrad’s novel remain a foreign and menacing other to Marlow while he is strangely attracted to Kurtz despite of the rumours of his barbaric actions, which really should make him also one of the others. But because Kurtz is a European, Marlow still tries to understand him. While Kurtz according to Marlow “had kicked himself loose of the earth” (Conrad 87) – in Kovol’s analysis loose from all moral restraint, she points out the passage where the native crew manning Marlow’s steamer is displaying this inner strength that Kurtz has left behind. She is referring to the lines in the text where
Marlow, who thinks that his crew really are cannibals, finds that they are showing restraint by not “resorting to their cannibalistic habits” (Kowol 87). Cannibalism seems to have been one of the major fears among Europeans in the colonies. Loomba quotes Peter Hulme’s work on colonial discourse in 16th century America where he claims that the word cannibal was used by the Europeans to describe the boundary between civility and wildness (85). In Conrad’s novel, Marlow is clearly impressed by the fact that the “cannibals” on the steamer can refrain from eating him, but he is never attempting to find out more about them by actually talking to them. Kowol finds that Marlow “fails to establish any deeper contact” (87) with anyone on the journey, not even with Mr Kurtz, “whose enormous self-preoccupation” (87) she describes as “an idealistic form of self-deception that results from an attempt to take the place of God” (87) which resulted in Kurtz imagining “himself a Messiah to African tribesmen (87). In the end of her paper Kowol quotes Cedric Watts’s Preface to Conrad about the author’s aim in Heart of Darkness seeming to be “to promote a greater understanding of man’s destructive tendencies, and at the same time support the modest countertruths on which civilisation depends” (167), but she also finds it extremely difficult “to share with others any sense of meaning, that one has attained, while self-delusion, relativism and egocentrism hinder every kind of reciprocity” (Kowol 88). It seems that the self-delusion of both Marlow and Kurtz makes everyone else in the novel an unreachable “other”. And at least to Marlow, the people in the novel that by him are named “niggers” and savages” seem to be definitely out of reach.

Othering because of culture in Paradise

While racism is the cause of much of the othering going on in Heart of Darkness, there are primarily non-racist reasons for the othering in Gurnah’s novel Paradise. The one character in the novel who most frequently is using words of othering is Mohammed Abdallah, the mnyapara – a leader of the trade expedition – that the young Yusuf is joining in the novel. His ethnicity is unclear, but he is often using phrases in Swahili in the novel. The word italicised above is also in Swahili, the lingua franca of East Africa that Gurnah’s novel starts and ends in. Gurnah wrote Paradise in English, but his frequent use of words and phrases in Swahili demonstrates how the language has an inclusive function in the area described in the novel, by forming a “we” who speak
Swahili. In certain situations, often connected to the Islamic religion, there are phrases in Arabic as well. One such situation is when it is discovered that Yusuf does not read Arabic well enough to understand the Koran. This revelation appals Hamid, the shopkeeper he is working for at the time:

“Do you know that we from the coast call ourselves waungwana? . . . It means people of honour. That’s what we call ourselves, especially up here among fiends and savages . . . It is God who gives us the right . . . If you cannot read His word or follow His law, you are no better than the worshippers of rocks and trees “ (Gurnah 99-100).

Hamid and his wife, who have come to like Yusuf, really want to include the boy in their “we” of pious Muslims, so Yusuf is sent to the local mosque to learn how to read together with much younger boys.

But all the othering in the novel is not based on religion, especially not the othering expressed by Mohammed Abdallah. As the leader of the trade expedition he is all the time in a very aggressive way busy, instilling fear and respect in the porters and guards of the expedition that are his subordinates. For example he can shout to his porters: “Unless you want me to dog your arses with a few lashes of my stick, you’d better get yourselves much calmer” (Gurnah 112). At another time he points at some impressive Masai warriors they are passing and says “Savages . . . Worth ten of any of you” (Gurnah 58) to mediate a mixture of caution and contempt for these people, foreign to the traders and their porters from the coast.

After working in different shops, Yusuf is asked by his master, the merchant Aziz, to join the next expedition. Aziz is a pious Muslim and never uses abusive language, unlike Mohammed Abdallah, whom he had hired to lead the expedition. When the expedition had travelled a distance into the interior Mohammed Abdallah delivered a warning to his subordinates: “We’re in the country of the savages. They’re not made of the same cowardly mud as you. They’ll steal anything, including your manhood if you don’t keep your cloths well tied around you (Gurnah 59). After this warning one of the porters says that he has heard that “savages” eat the penises of their enemies,
whereupon another porter asks why. Mohammed Abdallah answers with a comparison: “You don’t ask a shark why it attacks. It’s the same with the savage” (Gurnah 60). The othering used by Mohammed Abdallah and the porters about the people living in the interior of Africa that the expedition travels through expresses both scorn and fear. They see them as uncivilised people who do not share the same faith or follow the same laws as they themselves do, but they still want to do business with them. Their sense of superiority is however not based on the colour of their skin. There are blacks in different shades of colour both among the traders and their customers. The othering Paradise does not express the same kind of racism that is evident in the Europeans in Heart of Darkness. Instead, it is a question of culture-based xenophobia – those Africans in the interior who are not Muslims and live differently than townspeople, are considered unreliable and potentially dangerous by the traders. In spite of this, the merchant Aziz, who is doing the actual trading during the expedition, is always treating his customers with respect. That this had not always been the case becomes clear when the expedition arrives at a place ruled by a man called Chatu. When Aziz meets with this local ruler he learns that Chatu has had bad experiences from contacts with other trade caravans. “You have come here to do us harm. We have suffered from others like you who have preceded you, and have no intention of suffering again. They came among our neighbours and captured them and took them away”, Chatu says, referring to other people from the coast trading in slaves (Gurnah 160). Chatu explains that he will not be fooled like other people have been by other tradesmen. Through his interpreter he asks Aziz if he takes him for “a khoikhoi who will let strangers steal from him while he dances under the moon” (Gurnah 165).

This part of the story supports the claims made by Fawzia Mustafa in her paper “Gurnah and Naipaul: Intersections of Paradise and A Bend in the River” where she suggests that there in African history is no “single pre-colonial moment outside of colonial discursive frameworks, since such frameworks are not the creation solely of Eurocolonial forces, having been long established in pockets of different Islamic hegemonies, Arab or otherwise” (232). It is true that Africans had been exploited by Arabs, Indians and other Africans long before the European colonists arrived on the scene. But this does not really change the apparent differences between the expressions of othering in both
novels that I am comparing – racist in *Heart of Darkness* and xenophobic in *Paradise*. Said also writes in *Orientalism* about cultural perceptions of superiority, such as those that are described in *Paradise*, but claims that it is mainly Eurocentrism that gives examples of dehumanised thought: “a white, middle-class westerner believes it his human prerogative not only to manage the nonwhite world but also to own it, just because per definition ‘it’ is not quite as human as ‘we’ are” (Said 108). Arab slave traders in East Africa obviously thought themselves superior enough to own the people they bought and sold (Harrison 340-46), but Aziz, the Arab tradesman in Gurnah’s novel is definitely not othering people in the same way that Marlow and the other Europeans in *Heart of Darkness* are doing.

There is othering going on all through the confrontation between the merchant Aziz and Chatu, but also between Chatu and the European officer to whom Aziz reports that he has had his goods stolen by Chatu. In the end it is Chatu who will be the most humiliated, when the European officer mockingly asks him if he has become a “big man” (Gurnah 170) who is not afraid of the law and government. The law imposed in their colonies by the European colonists is perhaps the most thorough form of othering in the novel *Paradise*. The laws are proclaimed by the Europeans and the people in their colonies are forced to obey although they are imposed on them by a foreign colonial power. In this case Chatu is forced to return the stolen goods regardless of the fact that this was his first meeting with European colonial power. In this way, othering becomes a way of expressing status markers of different levels in the emerging colonial society.

### Othering as Status Markers in Both Novels

There seems to be only two levels of status in *Heart of Darkness* – either you are European and worth listening to or you are African and banished to the background. In the book *The Empire Writes Back* Conrad’s novel is mentioned as an example of a European fear that the Africans (and other colonised primitive people) were expressing “the other side of the European civilised psyche, the dark side of man” (Ashcroft et al 156). That is why Marlow and the other Europeans were so worried about the reports that Kurtz had set himself up as a worshipped tribal leader. He had gone over to the other side.
If it is either black or white in *Heart of Darkness* the status ladder is much more differentiated in *Paradise*. Gurnah is describing the old, pluralistic society of East Africa, where tradesmen from Oman and other Arabic places for centuries have had a powerful position thanks to their successful trade of goods in the African continent, in the novel represented by the merchant Aziz. There is also an Indian population that seems to have a status in between the successful Arab trading families and the indigenous people, at least if they are not Muslims. There is also some intermarrying over the culture borders in *Paradise*, Yusuf’s mother is by his father considered to have been a savage before he married her and Aziz’ second wife is a young, poor girl that was rescued from kidnappers who was going to sell her as a slave. In the end it is financial success that is the most deciding factor for someone’s status in this society, followed by religion and civilization. The lowest status refers to the African people from the interior of the continent that are neither Muslims nor townspeople. This society is not by any means idealised in Gurnah’s *Paradise*. Just like the above-mentioned Fawzia Mustafa, J U Jacobs points out in his paper that it is already obvious from the start of the novel that “the corruption of trade from a relationship between equals to one of subjection pre-dates European colonisation” (82). Mustafa also writes about the differences between the Arab elite and the indigenous people: “Although the inland and mainland coastal population share an Islamic faith this does not transcend the social and class divisions inherent in an Arabocentric hegemony” (236). In spite of this, in *Paradise* there is no questioning of the humanity of the indigenous people, as there is in *Heart of Darkness*. Yusuf, the protagonist of Gurnah’s novel, is in fact himself a slave – a *rehani*, that is a “guilt slave” that has been taken over by the merchant Aziz as collateral for the unpaid debts Yusuf’s father has to him. Thus, there is really a wide gap in status between Yusuf and the man he originally calls Uncle Aziz, but this is nothing that the merchant accentuates. Instead, Aziz is most of the time treating Yusuf as the distant relative the boy thinks that he is. The boy gradually finds out the truth, but it is not until the final page of the novel that he really does something to change his position.

Thanks to his good looks – Yusuf is through the whole novel described as a beautiful boy – he finds himself included in many situations where he should be excluded as a
child from a poor family and a rehani. Both men and women find him attractive and give him a higher status than they normally would have given a boy from his circumstances. His looks give him an attractive form of otherness. This part of the story is clearly intertextual with the biblical story of Joseph, the young boy who was sold into slavery in Egypt where he in the end became a powerful man, despite his background (Genesis chapters 37–44). Like the biblical Joseph, whose story is also retold in the Koran, Yusuf is taken from his parents, but ends up in a rather privileged position as a beautiful boy that many people are interested in. Because of this, Yusuf is through the whole story in a position where he can observe the othering between the people he meets. During one period he is stationed at one of Aziz’s shops, run by the Muslim Hamid who has an Indian friend, the mechanic Kalasinga. These two have an ongoing jargon of othering, where they insult each other's religion and culture, but still remain friends. In one scene Kalasinga makes fun of Hamid’s fear of dogs: “Kalasinga was pleased with his joke, chortling and slapping his thigh. Hamid called him names, mad infidel, thieving bastard, hairy kafir, but Kalasinga was not discouraged” (Gurnah 79). Because they know each other, the othering between them never becomes serious or threatening to their friendship. Hamid and Kalasinga both seem to accept their differences although they keep on mocking one another.

Nevertheless, characters in the novel are mostly using othering as a means of self-affirmation of their own status as someone civilised in contrast to the savage ways of others. In a magazine article about Gurnah’s novel Paradise Elizabeth Mazlen describes how the terms “civilised” and “savage” confront each other without “giving priority to the difference of colour: ‘civilised’ refers to the speaker and to those who practise his way of life, ‘savage’ refers to those who do not, for whom the speaker for the moment wishes to distance from himself” (Mazlen 55). Jacobs concludes that the society in which the novel Paradise is set really is no paradise, “only various hierarchies of possession, servitude and compliance” (Jacobs 87) and he quotes an interview where Gurnah said that the balancing act between societies in this part of Africa was “the very reason that the coastal regions are so vulnerable when European imperialism comes” (Nasta 361). Mustafa writes that Gurnah has staged his story in a “framework of the eclipse of Arabocentric and Islamic hegemony (233). Paradise is set
in a period when the German colonial power is replacing the Islamic elite of the area, which brings us to the othering between the colonised and their new masters.

**Othering Between Colonists and the Colonised**

While the indigenous people are always the other to the European colonists in *Heart of Darkness*, the characters in *Paradise*, who for centuries have othered each other due to class, culture or religion, are now in the early 1900s confronted with a new, threatening other – the European colonists. After the dramatic events in Chatu’s land, Mohammed Abdallah, the aggressive leader of the caravan who was beaten up by Chatu’s men, is disillusioned:

> There will be no more journeys now the European dogs are everywhere. By the time they have finished with us they will have fucked us up every hole in our bodies. Fucked us beyond recognition. We’ll be worse than the shit they’ll make us eat. Every evil will be ours, people of our blood, so that even naked savages will be able to despise us. You’ll see. (Gurnah 186)

The resigned Mohammed Abdallah is already mourning the loss of the status he used to have in the old society. He realises that after the arrival of the European colonists he will no longer belong to the upper levels of the society and will not be able to assert his position even towards the Africans he calls savages. To the Europeans he will just be a native like everyone else. However, besides sorrow, fear is the most common feeling characterising the othering-terms used about the Europeans in the novel. Already on the first page of the novel the young boy Yusuf is watching the first two Europeans he had seen – a man and a woman waiting at the station for the train. At first he is only curious, staring at the couple and studying their different bodies and clothes, but when the man discovers Yusuf he scares him off with a snarl. At this stage, Yusuf is living with his parents, in a town where his parents were running a small hotel. The town was growing because of the railroad that the Germans had built through it. Many of Yusuf’s friends had parents that had been working for the Germans on the railroad and before he saw his first Europeans he was fed strange stories that his friends had heard from their parents. They said that “Germans hanged people if they did not work hard enough. If
they were too young to hang, they cut their stones off” (Gurnah 7) and they concluded that the Germans were afraid of nothing. The Europeans were clearly a part of a frightening them, not the us that Yusuf had grown up within. Later, when Yusuf has joined Aziz's trade expedition, he listens to the porters that often discuss the strange Europeans. Nobody in the expedition seemed at that time to have really met or spoken to a European, but everyone had heard fantastic stories and legends. At every place they came during the first weeks of Aziz’s trade expedition they found that the Europeans had got there before them. Other traders that they met were amazed by the ferocity and ruthlessness of the Europeans: “Their appetite has no limit or decency, like a plague of locusts” (Gurnah 72). The European competition was quickly becoming a lethal threat to the old class of tradesmen in the region. Hussein, a trader Yusuf met, concluded that the European’s “want the whole world” (Gurnah 87). Fear is in the air every time that the Europeans are mentioned in the novel. To the African characters in Paradise the Europeans remain the threatening and incomprehensible Other. Some, like the merchant Aziz, are better informed than those who believe the wild rumours about the Europeans, but even they are aware of the threat from their new masters. After one of his expeditions Aziz analysed the situation: “The trade was excellent on the upper reaches of the rivers… The Europeans will close it off soon, the Belgique. I hear they are moving closer to the lakes. They’re envious, good-for-nothing paupers, with no understanding for business. I’ve heard about them. Even the German and the British are better, although God knows they are all vicious businessmen” (Gurnah 91), says Aziz who seems to have been told about the abuses in the Belgian colony of Kongo.

External Threat as the Cause of Othering

Aziz is fearing the vicious competition of the Europeans, but in Gurnah’s Paradise this fear is never described as mutual. In the few places where Europeans are given voice they seem very confident, even despising the indigenous people they meet. In Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, the European’s contempt is mixed with fear of the Africans' barbarity. When Marlow had brought Kurtz onboard his steamer a large crowd of the people that Kurtz had been ruling appeared on the river beach. When the boat came abreast again the tribesmen “stamped their feet, nodded their horned heads, swayed their scarlet bodies” (Conrad 88). The description is contemptuous, but also filled with fear,
since Marlow describes what he sees “as some satanic litany” (Conrad 88), although his fear is mostly directed at Kurtz. Marlow explains that after he had forced Kurtz to board the steamer, “tried to break the spell – the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness – that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts” (Conrad 86). Marlow’s own interpretation of Kurtz was that he had fallen back into the barbarity of the indigenous people he had been living with.

The Europeans in Paradise, on the other hand, seem to have overcome the fear of uncivilised barbarity that characterises Heart of Darkness. Gurnah’s story is set almost twenty years later in a time where the only real threat to power of the German colonists in East Africa is coming from other European colonial powers. There is no element of fear from the European officer’s side in his meeting with Chatu. He simply demands that he should obey the German laws. The officer does not even bother to answer Chatu’s questions about the law and leaves it to his interpreter to finish the conversation: “Stop this useless talk… Go and bring these people’s goods before there is trouble… otherwise you’ll soon know what the government can do” (Gurnah 171). Gurnah describes the German colonists in Africa as very confident before World War I.

A Comparison of the Endings in Both Novels

“The horror! The horror! (Gurnah 91)” – Kurtz’s final words have become classical and it is probably the only quote from Heart of Darkness that many people know without having read the book. Although it, as Agata Kowol points out in her paper, is never revealed what “the horror” actually means, Marlow makes his own interpretation at the end of the novel, when he is about to visit the woman who was intended to become Kurtz’s wife.

The vision seemed to enter the house with me – the stretcher, the phantom bearers, the wild crowd of obedient worshippers, the gloom of the forests, the glitter of the reach between the murky bends, the beat of the drum, regular and muffled like the beating of the heart – the heart of the conquering darkness. It was a moment of triumph for the wilderness” (Conrad 96).
Marlow connects this scene that he remembers with Kurtz’s last words about the horror. Marlow identifies the horror with what he saw as Kurtz’s surrendering to the barbarity of his tribe. It is this fear of becoming uncivilised that characterises the whole story – a fear of becoming, like Kurtz, one of them instead of one of us.

*Paradise*, on the other hand, ends in a scene where Yusuf’s fear of the Europeans is overcome by his curiosity. After the dramatic trade expedition, Yusuf has returned to Aziz’s shop where he is working together with his friend Khalil. They have been warned by Aziz about the Germans having started kidnapping people to make them porters for the army. If they see the Germans coming they are to shut up the shop at once and hide. Initially they do just that when they see a German officer with a group of soldiers arrive in the town. But while watching the officer and the soldiers through a crack in the wall of the boarded shop, Yusuf changes his mind. The last sentence in the novel tells us that he is running after the column of soldiers, probably intending to join up and become one himself. Jacobs interprets this scene as Yusuf is eventually arriving at a point “where he sees how he himself is actually seen, and acts on this insight” (79). Yusuf’s joining the German’s native troops is by Jacobs understood as resignation: If the Europeans consider me a servant I might as well become one. But before this situation Yusuf has just found out that not only he, but also his friend Khalil and his sister Amina are also *rehanis*. It seems that Yusuf has grown tired of being a servant bound to the merchant Aziz and is curious about whether serving the Germans as a soldier would give him more freedom. If he cannot be free within the “us” he thought he belonged to he will try to improve his life among “them” – the European colonists and their army.

**Conclusion**

It was in the age of colonialism that Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* appeared and it described a situation and an environment where a civilised European (Kurtz) had lost his civilisation and become a leader of savages. The othering in Conrad’s novel is about being black or white, a civilised man or a savage.

While Conrad wrote in the middle of the colonial period, Gurnah could in his novel from a post-colonial perspective recreate some remaining parts of a pre-colonial society.
The society he is presenting is indeed no pre-colonial paradise, but Gurnah is also describing the fear of the ruthless European colonists in all classes of that society. The othering in his novel that is going on between different groups in Africa is xenophobic, but not racist as in *Heart of Darkness*. Neither is the othering between Africans and Europeans in *Paradise* racist as corresponding relations are in Conrad’s book. It is prejudiced, but not racist in the superior way of the Europeans, simply because it is powerless. The East African characters in *Paradise* are othering the Europeans by comparing them with predators, and thereby increasing their own fear.

Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* has been interpreted as critical of colonialism, but it remains a colonial novel, where the only person who is crossing the border between us and them is Kurtz, an action that Conrad lets his protagonist Marlow interpret as “a triumph for the wilderness”. While *Heart of Darkness* ends with the fear of crossing the border between us and them, Yusuf, the protagonist in *Paradise*, is really crossing the border by joining up for the Germans. He leaves his own “us” to take his chances among “them”.

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