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Empire, Resistance and the Question of Englishness on the Colonial Frontier in H. Rider Haggard's *Jess* and *Swallow*

Elvan Mutlu[1]
Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University, Türkiye

Abstract:

This paper examines H. Rider Haggard's presentation of English, Scottish or British identity in his South African romances by investigating the imperial dimension of the expansion of England and how the concept of English national identity (or Englishness)is established within texts such as Jess (1887) and Swallow: A Tale of the Great Trek (1899). These romances are rich in the concerns of settler writing, the question of whether Empire is a success, and whether Africa becomes another home for the English national identity. This paper also examines the expanding nature of the British Empire and the way in which new identity formations become possible within a rather multicultural, specifically South African context.

Keywords: Empire, Englishness, resistance, H. Rider Haggard, *Jess*, *Swallow*

[1] This is a part of the author's PhD thesis, and it has not been published elsewhere.

Introduction

From the very early days of his life, Henry Rider Haggard was not as enthusiastic as his brothers about school, and his impartiality towards school urged his father to find another way of keeping him busy. He obtained a post for Rider on the staff of Sir Henry Bulwer, Lieutenant-Governor of the province of Natal in South Africa. Haggard travelled extensively and spent six years in South Africa. Fascinated by its landscape, "Haggard was deeply impressed with both the grandeur and the savagery of tribal life, and felt them to be in some sense truer than the civilized ideas of Victorian England" (Green 230). Influenced by his personal life and experiences, he set his romances in far-off corners of the world. While on leave in Norfolk, he got married to Louisa Margitson and then returned to establish an ostrich farm at Hilldrop near Newcastle in South Africa. On his farm, the first thing Haggard did was to create a garden, plant roses and "a vineyard in front, and a screen of blue gums around it" (Lilias Rider Haggard 75). He wrote a letter to his mother asking "her to send him nuts and acorns from his favourite beech and oak trees in the park at Bradenham, so that he could grow 'English trees'" (75).However, he returned to England after witnessing the First Boer War of 1880-1881, which ended in victory for the Boers; the agreement of returning self-government to the Transvaal was drafted in his farmhouse 'The Palatial', which is also known as 'Jess Cottage'. This chapter will examine how Haggard's agricultural experience in South Africa influences his own writing and how English ethnicity is developed as a "perpetual process of becoming, a pursuit of authenticity in which the copy is allowed to be as authentic as any original. Being English was always about being out of place, about displacement from an earlier point of origin – but its dynamics can only be understood by realizing that there was rarely a prior moment of being in place" (Young 19-20; also Baucom). This insight will be explored in Haggard's novels, *Jess* (1887) and *Swallow: A Tale of the Great Trek* (1899).

Britishness as a political and cultural identity rather than an ethnicity, was created by the Scottish King James I, following his ascendance to the English throne when Elizabeth I died. The idea behind this creation was to combine southern and northern Britain to establish a 'Great Britain' and, accordingly, the British Empire. Thus, it was after 1707 when the British started to identify themselves as a single unit, as Linda Colley observes, "not because of any political or cultural consensus at home, but rather in reaction to the Other beyond their shores" (Colley 6). Krishan Kumar observes that Britain and the Empire were created by the English and the control of this empire was achieved by not insisting on their national identity, as the Scots, Welsh and Irish also had a central role in the creation of the British Empire, rather than only a "peripheral" position (Kumar 179).Kumar's observation on this cautiousness was related to the concerns over the unity and integrity of the structures that the English created throughout history. On one level, it motivated the British people to think of themselves as a part of a unity without thinking of their more dependent role within it. In contrast to the Scots, Welsh and Irish, however, the definition of national identity was more complicated for the English. They could not simply take ownership of a conventional nationalist pride; it would potentially threaten the integrity of the Empire. Therefore, "English identity had to find objects other than the English nation on which to fasten" (Kumar 179).This chapter will examine how the English national identity is expanded for possible new dimensions of identity formation in rural Africa.

Until 1471, when the Portuguese founded a trade in gold and slaves, Africa remained untouched by any European control. Following the Portuguese, the Dutch arrived in the Cape

of Good Hope in 1652 and colonised the land by settling Dutch farmers on the African topography. As a result of the religious uneasiness in France, the Protestant Huguenot's made their way to South Africa, where they settled down with the Dutch, thus constructing a new identity, the African Boer (*boer* is the Dutch word for a farmer). In the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, Britain colonised the Cape, and the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a change in the colonial language, with English superseding the Boer's language, Afrikaans (Monsman 13). However, Britain was indifferent to Cape Colony until the 1860s, when, with the discovery of diamonds and gold, the real imperial mission began. As a result of the colliding interests between the traditional farmers and the mining needs that entailed a centralised state, the Anglo-Boer War of 18991902 broke out. Haggard reflected this uneasiness between the Boers and the English in several of his romances, including *Jess* and *Swallow*, and also in a non-fiction work, *The Last Boer War* (1899).The ideological and material connection between Britain and Cape Colony has been studied by several critics, like Bank (1995) and Ross (1999).What this paper suggests, however, is that this connection could be shaped and reshaped by a new global framework in political and cultural entities. Although imperial centres and colonial peripheries were mostly connected "through material flows of capital, commodities and labour" (Lester 6), newspapers, books, and letters were carried by British steamships between the metropole and the colony, thus paving the way for a discursive articulation of the national identity (Said 60). As Alan Lester observes, settlers turned to three strategies in the formation of a united national character, which eventually established a "British settler identity", embracing various ethnic backgrounds: "the invention of a shared past", a unified "settler 'character', which could serve to obscure real differences of personality and politics" and an "emphasis in daily gendered routines" (Lester 46).

Resisting the Empire and the Question of Englishness in *Jess* and *Swallow: A Tale of the Great Trek*

One of the most neglected of Haggard's romances, *Jess* is among the stories of South Africa's "blood stained history" (Monsman 143). Similar to Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), the romance tells the story of rural colonial Africa where the protagonist Jess, parallel to Schreiner's Lyndall, is described as an independent, intellectual woman, leading to scholars reflecting on this aspect of "colonial feminine psychology" in the novel, *Jess* (Monsman 143). The novelist set on an ostrich farm in the Transvaal and narrates the clashes during the events of the retrocession between 1880-1881, thus reminding the reader of Haggard's own experience as an ostrich farmer in Natal during that period. In the story, Captain John Neil, retired from the army, buys a share of Silas Croft's farm, Mooifontain, in the Transvaal, near the border with Natal; later in the romance, Haggard shows old Silas Croft's English patriotism and how brutally the Boers treat him, which Monsman interprets as "Haggard's overt anger at what he sees as the British betrayal of the English colonists and British soldiers in the Transvaal" (144). *Jess* opens with the representation of space in relation to the objects that are related to the English national identity. Haggard describes Silas Croft's farmhouse as "a very pleasant room, furnished in European style, and carpeted with mats made of springbuck skins. In the corner stood a piano, and by it a bookcase, filled with the works of standard authors, the property as John rightly guessed, of Bessie's sister Jess"

(Haggard *Jess* 12).[2]This African rural space is defined within the discourse of literature as well as political articles as associated with the English objects and place. Captain John Neil, who leaves the army and buys a share of Silas Croft's farm, admits that:

> […] the life of a South African farmer came well up to his expectations. He had ample occupation; indeed, what between ostriches, horses, cattle, sheep, and crops, he was rather over than under occupied. Nor was he much troubled by the lack of civilised society, for he was a man who read a great deal, and books could be ordered from Durban and Cape Town, while the weekly mail brought with it a sufficient supply of papers. On Sundays he always read the political articles in the 'Saturday Review' aloud to Silas Croft, who, as he grew older, found that the print tried his eyes, [...] Silas was a well-informed man, and notwithstanding his long life spent in a half-civilised country, had never lost his hold of affairs or his interest in the wide and rushing life of the world in one of whose side eddies he lived apart. This task of reading the 'Saturday Review' aloud had formerly been a part of Bessie's Sunday service […]. (Haggard *Jess* 96-97)

As Monsman observes, these books from Durban and Cape Town, which were "the metropolitan British centres *in* colonial Africa, were not *of* Africa" (15).[3] It is also of some significance to note that, from the 1860s to the 1880s, "the monthly mail-bag to the outback became weekly" (Monsman 15), as illustrated in *Jess*; this is an essential component of the attachment to the centre, England. In this novel, the Englishwomen, Bessie and Jess, are actively engaged in colonial life, running the farm when their uncle is away for business. One difference between them however, is how they each attach themselves to their past home, England. Jess develops this connection through her readings of English novels and newspapers, which gives her a "god-like gift of brains, the gift that had been more of a curse than a blessing to her, lifting her above the level of her sex and shutting her off as by iron doors from the understanding of those around her" (Haggard *Jess* 23). Haggard describes Bessie more in the peripheral discourse. Bessie tells John: '"You are different to me; you are a man of the world, and if ever you went back to England I should be a drag on you, and you would be ashamed of me and my colonial ways"'(*Jess* 108). Unlike Jess, Bessie's English national identity becomes detached from its roots and displaced, implying a new gesture, a new beginning, which emerges as an independent form out of the colonising impulse of the Anglo-Saxon race.

Jess is a highly political novel, which draws a vivid picture of the tensions between the Boers and the English during the retrocession of Transvaal to the Boers, and the contradictory impulses within the characters of the novel are evident throughout the narration. Frank Muller, for instance, is described as half Boer and half Englishman, with "light-blue eyes, and a remarkable golden beard that hung down over his chest. For a Boer he was rather smartly dressed in English-made tweed clothes, and tall riding-boots" (*Jess* 25). When he is addressed as "Meinheer!" he opposes being referred to in that way, and clings to his English roots: '"I tell you I am not a Boer. I am an Englishman. My mother was English; and thanks to Lord Carnarvon, we are all English now"'(35).Among the turbulence of the political changes in the novel, however, Muller declares himself as anti-English and challenges the politics of the English rule:

[2]All subsequent references are to this edition.
[3]Emphasis in original.

> ‘And then,’ he went on, giving his ambition wing, ‘when I have won Bessie, and we have kicked all these Englishmen out of the land, in a very few years I shall rule this country [...]’. (Haggard *Jess* 112)

Thus, we could conclude, by noting Muller’s case, that English ethnicity is unsettled in the colonial discourse of the novel. This political tone becomes even more straightforward later in the narration, when Hans Coetzee asks the question of ‘“What is the English Government doing here?”’(*Jess* 178). In *Jess*, Haggard finds an opportunity to attack William Gladstone’s policies, especially during the First Boer War (1880-1881), resulting in the defeat of Majuba Hill. Upon his capture by the Boers, Silas Croft describes himself as a victim of English treachery: ‘“England has deserted us and I have no country”’(*Jess* 280). As an enthusiast for imperial reform, Gladstone believed that, during the time of the “brazen age” (1783-1840), it was necessary for the metropolitan intervention in the settler colonies to come to an end (Gladstone 17). He was a keen supporter of the idea that “the affairs of the colonies are best transacted and provided for by the colonists themselves, as the affairs of Englishmen are best transacted by Englishmen” (Gladstone 20). This transaction could not happen, as Haggard also informs his reader in this novel; this defeat is linked to the English system administering the British Empire:

‘Ah!’ said Bessie; ‘well, he can't do much now that the country is English.’

> ‘I am not so sure of that. I am not so sure that the country is going to stop English. You laugh at me for reading the home papers, but I see things there that make me doubtful. The other party is in power now in England, and one does not know what they may do; you heard what uncle said to-night. They might give us up to the Boers. You must remember that we far-away people are only the counters with which they play their game.’
>
> ‘Nonsense, Jess,’ said Bessie indignantly. ‘Englishmen are not like that. When they say a thing, they stick to it.’ (*Jess* 58-59)

Haggard includes different Boer voices, who resist the English rule and fight for the freedom of the African territories. ‘“It will be the Transvaal for the Transvaalers, then, and Africa for the Africanders,”’ says Muller, (*Jess* 115) resisting the imperial ideology of the British government. The new Gladstone government and the changing policies towards the colonial administration that would lead the way for an “anti-English republic of the whole country”(114) are further depicted by Haggard, who links these to the wider question of imperial longevity:

> Indeed, it is the widespread possession of this sentiment that has made England what she is. Now it is beginning to die down and to be legislated out of our national character, and the results are already commencing to appear […] We cannot govern Ireland. It is beyond us; let Ireland have Home Rule! We cannot cope with our Imperial responsibilities; let them be cast off: and so on […] Well, every nation becomes emasculated sooner or later […] This country was made, not by Governments, but for the most part in despite of them by the independent efforts of generations of individuals. The tendency nowadays is to merge the individual in the Government, and to limit or even forcibly to destroy personal enterprise and responsibility. Everything is to be legislated for or legislated against.[…] the empire will lose touch of its constituent atoms and become a vast soulless machine, which will first get out of order, then break down, and, last of all, break up. We owe more to sturdy, determined, inconvincible Englishmen like John Niel than we know, or, perhaps, should be

> willing to acknowledge in these enlightened days. 'Long live the Caucus!' that is the cry of the nineteenth century. But what will Englishmen cry in the twentieth?' (*Jess* 133).

The English man is not welcomed in this colonial space and Haggard eventually sends his male character back to England. Jess's death towards the end of the romance could, therefore, represent the wrongness of the English presence and English policies in Transvaal: '"John', said the old man when they had filled in the grave, 'this is no country for Englishmen. Let us go home to England'" (*Jess* 335). In his analysis of different locations of Englishness that could represent England, Baucom finds that each of these locations shares similarities about Englishness, but each is "never the same thing that it represents itself to be, that in each of them Englishness is continuously discontinuous with what it was a moment ago and what is about to become" (Baucom 163). While Haggard seems to create a 'little England' at the beginning of the novel, this notion becomes out of the question towards the end of the novel, thus paving the way for the construction of a "continuously discontinuous" English national identity. Haggard's story shows how the English are no longer accepted in the context of Transvaal; their diasporic identity is intended to be reattached to home, to England.

Haggard's fantasy tale of adventure, *Swallow: A Tale of the Great Trek*, was serialised in *The Graphic* between July and October 1898 and published by Longmans in 1899. This romance also narrates the meeting between the Boers and the English, so the narrative tone of the book resembles that of *Jess*. Set during the years between 1836 and 1838 (during the Boers' Great Trek), one might assume that this romance would be a significant document of the anti-Boer reaction; however, Haggard's narration tells the reader of a reversal of the situation:

> Someone connected with the London Missionary Society reported us to the Government at the Cape for shooting poor, innocent black men, and it was threatened that Jan Ralph would be put upon their trial for murder by the British Government.[…] Our case was only one of many, since in those times there was no security for us Boers – we were robbed, we were slandered, we were deserted. Our goods were taken and we were not compensated; the Kaffirs stole our herds, and if we resisted them we were tried as murderers […] No wonder that we grew tired of it and trekked, seeking to shake the dust of British rule from off our feet, and to find a new home for ourselves out of the reach of the hand of the accursed British Government. Oh! I know that there are two sides to the story, and I daresay that the British Government meant well, but at the least it was a fool, and it always will be a fool with its Secretaries of State, who know nothing sitting far away there in London, and its Governors, whose only business is to please the Secretaries of State, that when the country they are sent to rule grows sick of them, they may win another post with larger pay. (Haggard *Swallow* 228-29)[4]

This tale of the great Boer trek from the old colony, which drives them into the wilderness to fight with the Zulus in order to find a new home country, is thus composed not in an imperialistic discourse but rather in a sympathetic tone. In his dedication to the romance, Haggard also admits that the Boers experienced certain troubles at the hands of the English government: "Their maltreatment was not intentional indeed, but rather a result of the systematic neglect – to use a mild word – of colonies and their inhabitants" (*Swallow* v). Even in his biography, Haggard confesses that the more he studies the character of the Boer nation,

[4]All subsequent references are to this edition.

the more he admires them, especially in their passionate cause for the land and agriculture, some of the causes about which Haggard was also very passionate. Boers, Haggard narrates, are superior to Englishmen, "who are always in a hurry", and can "master them in everything, except shop keeping" (*Swallow* 331-32). In a similar account in *Jess*, Haggard follows the strategy of speaking from the Boer point of view:

> 'I have been twice to England now and I know the Englishman. I could measure him for his *veldtschoens* (shoes). He knows nothing – nothing. He understands his shop; he is buried in his shop, and can think of nothing else. Sometimes he goes away and starts a shop in other places, and buries himself in it, and makes it a big shop, because he understands shops. But it is all a question of shops, and if the shops abroad interfere with the shops at home, or if it is thought that they do, which comes to the same thing, then the shops at home put an end to the shops abroad. Bah! they talk a great deal there in England, but, at the bottom of it, it is shop, shop, shop. They talk of honour, and patriotism too, but they both give way to the shop.' (*Jess* 185-86)

The fact that Ralph Kenzie, a Scottish boy, is adopted by a Boer family in *Swallow* is an example of Haggard's appreciation of the Boer character, which contains a solidarity which can coexist with the incorporated Scots within the British Empire. Ralph's marriage to Suzanne, who is Dutch-French, and they are brought up together by her Boer parents, also justifies Haggard's attempt to create a diverse culture in *Swallow*. Ralph's acceptance into the Boer family as a son-in-law and, accordingly, the possibility of racial mixing tells the reader that the South African colonial setting in this romance is rather irreducibly cosmopolitan. Criticism of the Empire is also rather explicit in the narrative flow of the story, when the narrator, Suzanne Naunde, introduces Ralph as a castaway boy: "It seems that the boy, who gave his name as Ralph Kenzie […] was travelling with his father and mother […] from a country called India, which is one of those places that the English have stolen in different parts of the world, as they stole the Cape and Natal and all the rest" (*Swallow* 20). This quotation makes it clear that one should look at Haggard's lesser-known romances to see a resistance against the imperialistic discourse. Adopted as a Boer boy and described as having "English blood" (*Swallow* 41), Ralph's Scottish origins are integrated into the English national identity in this romance:

> 'So. He makes a good Boer for one of English blood, does he not? And yet I suppose that when he becomes English again he will soon forget that he was ever a Boer.'
> 'When he becomes English again, mother! What do you mean by that saying?' she asked quickly.
> […]
> 'I mean, Suzanne, that it is not well for any of us to let our love wrap itself too closely about a stranger. Ralph is an Englishman, not a Boer. He names me mother and your father, father; and you he names sister, but to us he is neither son nor brother.' (*Swallow* 31-32)

Although Scots were conscious of their dual nationality – British and Scottish – in nineteenth-century imperial discourse, and in *Swallow*, Scottishness seems to be absorbed by the "adaptive" English national identity (Young 6), as is shown in the character of Ralph Kenzie. With this national and cultural triangle – Ralphin *Swallow*, born Scottish, adopted as Boer and accepted as English –Haggard creates one of his most cosmopolitan protagonists. The incorporation between England and Scotland in the process of forming Great Britain is further

exemplified in the novel when two Scotchmen are defined as representative of the English government: '"not the English Government, but two Scotchmen, which is much the same thing. I tell you that they are travelling to this place to take you away"'(*Swallow* 44). The terms Scottish and English are used interchangeably in this novel, mostly in the way of "English or Scotch", in order to emphasise the dialectic attachment of the English national identity to the notions of "displacement, migration, colonization" (Young 7). However, despite this interchangeable use of these terms, Ralph Kenzie is referred to as "the best and bravest Englishman that ever lived in Africa" (*Swallow* 4), which reminds the reader of the internal colonialism that resulted in the colonisation of the Celtic culture by the apparent superior Anglo-Saxon culture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has discussed how Haggard's response to the idea of English national identity and, as is the case in *Jess* and *Swallow*, how Africa, or, here, in Haggard's context, South Africa, is not regarded as home but as a temporary attachment for the English ethnicity, which is eventually reattached to England, the metropolitan imperial centre. Referring to the close cooperation between the Scots and English, Scottishness also seems to be absorbed by the 'adaptive' English national identity, which adds a different political, as well as cultural aspect to Haggard's narrative voice. Within this context, the expansion of Englishness could be read parallel to the expanding nature of the British Empire, and it could be discussed how by referring to Scottishness and the English national identity interchangeably, Haggard celebrates the Celts in the formation of Englishness.

As we can also see, Haggard moves the idea of rural England to rural Africa and, accordingly, creates a 'little England' that has been transported elsewhere – in other words, it is out of place. Read within this context, rather than merely described as a 'dark continent', Africa could be interpreted as the heart of mixed cultures, which paves the way for new identity formations. In *Jess* and *Swallow*, Haggard's characters cross borders and interact with different cultures, incorporating a cosmopolitanism and defining their Englishness in a larger multicultural context. Both romances actively engage with the concerns of settler writing, the question of imperial expansion and whether Africa is seen as home to the English national identity. With the discussion of both romances, it could also be concluded that Haggard appears to examine the Scottish contribution to empire-building and its impact on the cultural and national identity. Haggard's romances exemplify how as the Empire expands across borders and continents, so does the adaptive nature of English national identity.

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