



Mary Robinson's *Lyrical Tales* (1800): The Horrors of Alienation, War, Slavery, and Social Segregation

Rayna Rosenova

University of Sofia

The article discusses a selection of poems from Mary Robinson's *Lyrical Tales* (1800), offering a close reading to show how Robinson engaged with pertinent historical issues, such as slavery, war and power relations, that marked the last decade of the eighteenth century. It explores Robinson's use of Gothic and sublime aesthetics to communicate the ruptures found in society and to represent various states of otherness. In the poems under discussion, the Gothic is used to externalize both psychological and social collapse, communicating the sense of instability, vulnerability, alienation, anxiety, and fragmentation. Robinson's use of Gothic conventions creates a gloomy atmosphere which seeks to accentuate the ills of eighteenth-century British politics and society and to engage the reader sympathetically.

Keywords: Gothic, sublime, alienation, warfare, slavery, power relations, marginalization, oppression, society.

In a letter to an unknown publisher dated June 17, 1800, Robinson described a new literary project consisting of “Tales, serious and gay, on a variety of subjects in the manner of Wordsworth's *Lyrical ballads*” (54). The appearance of *Lyrical Tales* in 1800, one month before the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, allegedly, almost made Wordsworth withdraw his volume from publication due to his reluctance to be associated with a woman of notorious fame and a former Della Cruscan.¹ Indeed, a number of Robinson's poems in *Lyrical Tales* enter into dialogue with Wordsworth's. Robinson's volume addresses pertinent social and political issues, showing the interpenetration of the public and the domestic spheres to level criticism at defective national policies, institutions, and social bias.

More generally, the poems in *Lyrical Tales* can be divided into two groups: the satirical poems, which aim to expose the everyday naiveté and flaws of common people, originally voiced by the ribald spinster Tabitha Bramble,² and the poems invested in social and political issues, such as slavery, war, power relations, gender issues, and alienation, voiced by either the characters themselves or by a sympathetic speaker. The serious tales carry political import and show the underside of national policies and imperialism. This article explores Mary Robinson's use of Gothic aesthetics in a selection of poems from *Lyrical Tales* as the means to transmute the horrors of alienation and dispossession of an array of socially marginalized figures, whereby she seeks to expose the injustices of the socio-political system and to comment on the iniquities of warfare, the slave trade and social hegemony in both their political and

¹ See Curran 17 – 35. The possibility of withdrawal from publication is also evidenced in a letter written by Dorothy Wordsworth in September 1800: “My brother William is going to publish a second Edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* with a second volume. He intends to give them the title of ‘Poems by W. Wordsworth’ as Mrs. Robinson has claimed the title and is about publishing a volume of *Lyrical Tales*. This is a great objection to the former title, particularly as they are both printed at the same press and Longman is the publisher of both of the works.” (quoted in Pascoe 38) See also Byrne 359 – 360 and Cross 171.

² On Tabitha Bramble, see Vargo 37 – 52.

psychological dimension. In the volume, reality is permeated with violence, suffering, loss, and trauma, produced by the inhumane imperialist consciousness that supports slavery and military expansion and by the tyranny of patriarchal oppression.

Robinson's decision to call her poems "tales" is significant. The "tale" as a generic type is important to human culture as it acts as a historical record. Robinson's social project aims to comprise a collective story of underprivileged and oppressed figures. Moreover, a majority of poems in the collection are either modelled after the folk ballad or experiment with the ballad form. During the close of the eighteenth century, the ballad was politicized as a genre to express radical ideas and voice the social injustices that marked the age (Burwick et al. 1138). Hence, it was associated with the disenfranchised and other marginal figures (Behrendt 68-69). The momentum that Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) gave to the new Romantic aesthetics provided Robinson with a medium which she could exploit to voice her humanitarian concern for the dispossessed figures who suffered at the hands of an unjust system that favoured slavery and abused human labour, or were the victims of warfare and unwarranted violence. Commenting on Robinson's volume, Stuart Curran has noted its preoccupation with displacement. "This is a sad world," Curran writes, "one that witnesses constant abuses of power, where armies do no one any good, where class conflict is systemic and cannot be wished away by liberal compromise, and where not prescriptivism but insanity and stark alienation seem the logical end of interiorizing social conditions" (31). Curran's comment succinctly summarizes the main concerns of the poems in the collection and the focus on human contingencies.

In the poems, the Gothic is used to transmute the horrors of alienation and dispossession of an array of socially marginalized figures and to level criticism at the injustices of the socio-political system. The use of the sublime and the supernatural in some of the poems foregrounds the looming mental and existential collapse that threatens, or has assailed, such dislocated figures and their fractured subjectivity. The characters' borderline status in the *Lyrical Tales* is reinforced by the spaces/places they inhabit: a church graveyard, lofty rocks and mountains, seashores, dwellings overshadowed by a feudal castle, and dilapidated cottages on lonely hills, among others. Likewise, the highly evocative description of the landscape, especially in its sublime renditions, serves to externalize and magnify states of subjectivity and alterity. As Ashley Cross notes, "[c]ut off from society, all of these characters inhabit worlds that reflect their own psychological realities" (183). In the majority of these poems, Robinson's strategy is to show how the atrocities of the socio-political situation reflect on human identity. It involves the staging of an atmosphere which mirrors the subject's social alienation while nature is used as a canvas to project his or her psychological state.

It is significant that the volume draws on the discourse of sensibility, which was a potent tool in radical writings, as it aimed to engage the reader by pointing the injustices of the governing and social body. Robinson's collection engages with the characters that the literature of sensibility came to monopolize: the poems dramatize the material condition of the suffering minorities (the destitute, the victims of war, slaves and lascars, madmen, orphans, exiles) and their psychological state. Importantly, Robinson deploys a number of formal and aesthetic strategies to make her case. She draws upon Gothic and sublime imagery to highlight the psychological torment of slaves and exiled figures, whereby she not only externalizes the anguish provoked by the mistreatment they suffer, but also the unethical aspect of British imperialist consciousness. Thus, in the narratives, the socio-political system is exposed as dysfunctional, inhumane, and infringing upon natural human rights, whereas people of rank and power are presented as immoral and callous.

Dealing with such issues by exclusively focusing on the suffering victims, however, had its deficiencies. By deploying the rhetoric of sensibility, writers jeopardized the sincerity of their stance and risked sounding patronizing and egotistic rather than sympathetic. Therefore, as Jennifer Keith has reminded us, writers sought to overcome this challenging aspect of sensibility rhetoric by appropriating certain formal strategies to avoid objectifying their subjects (97 –124). These included granting the characters a personal voice and enacting a mental crisis to emphasize their individual subjectivity, thus minimizing authorial intrusion in the narrative. In its ethical aspect, *Lyrical Tales* gives prominence to the "little narratives" and sentiments of Robinson's selection of common men. In some of the poems,

Robinson assumes the role of a sympathetic traveller and narrator, aiming to highlight her own presence as a poet. In this role she embodies Adam Smith's impartial spectator, who uses her sensibility and sympathetic imagination to empathize with the suffering of others. Alternatively, some of the poems are written from the perspective of the characters themselves, thus lending greater credence to the affliction brought by capitalism and its advocacy of colonialism, slavery, and warfare.

Lyrical Tales opens with a poem which sets the tone and the mood for the serious poems in the collection. Robinson appears as the wandering poet-narrator: "[t]he Trav'ler stops to hear thy tale" (II. 2), whereby she assumes the position of a sympathetic spectator. In "All Alone" the orphaned boy, himself resembling a mere life-in-death as suggested by his "cheek . . . now grown deathly pale" (IV. 2), inhabits a liminal space on the threshold between life and death – a church graveyard. The encounter in Robinson's poem, unlike in Wordsworth's poems, ends in negation, that is, with no insight or resolution gained from it. The sympathy of Robinson's traveller remains a voice addressing a listener too much grounded in his own reality. The orphan, a victim of circumstance, having lost his father, presumably a soldier or a sailor taken "o'er the stormy sea / To distant lands" (XIII. 73 – 74), now mourns the loss of his mother, whom he is unwilling to let go. Left at the mercy of the elements, the boy laments

"O! yes, I was! and still shall be
 A wand'rer, mourning and forlorn;
 For what is all the world to me –
 What are the dews and buds of morn?
 Since she, who left me sad, alone
 In darkness sleeps, beneath yon stone!" (XXIII. 133 – 138)

The boy is anchored to the grave where his mother rests and rejects the sympathy offered him by Robinson's persona, thus choosing loss and despair over recuperation. Having no kin in the world, the boy is devoid not only of purpose but also of identity: the only place where he could find a sense of belonging is the cold stone of his mother's grave. "What should it know of death?" (4), asks Wordsworth in "We Are Seven," contemplating the little girl's innocence. By contrast, Robinson's boy knows too much of death. Unlike Wordsworth's poem in which the girl refuses to acknowledge loss, Robinson's boy systematically reiterates the state of being alone in the world. Having no identity and sense of belonging, due to the trauma of losing his family and the peace of domestic comfort, the boy has come to embody the sense of loss himself and to identify with spaces of death and emptiness, such as the cold bare rock and the grave. Hence, the loss of familial bonding leads to an extreme state of alienation from the world and from social bonding.

The orphan's family story reveals themes to be developed in succeeding poems. The boy says that his father "o'er the stormy sea / To distant lands was borne away" (XIII. 1 – 2), and later on intimates "My father never will return, / He rests beneath the sea-green wave" (XXV. 1 – 2). These implications conjure notions about the boy's father being sent abroad as a soldier to serve the nation at the expense of the protection of his wife and children. As Mary A. Favret has pointed out, romantic war poetry correlated the soldier and his "mortal, mangled body" with "the vulnerable, often injured bodies of those removed from public life on the domestic front—the beggars, widows, orphans and elderly displaced by the effects of war" ("Coming Home" 544). Robinson's poem dramatizes the impact of war on the families of civilians recruited to defend the country on the front. Hence, the boy and his mother epitomize the collateral victims of war. This is a theme that Robinson revisits in a number of poems.

The theme of wandering and alienation is further developed in "The Fugitive," in which a priest fallen victim to the persecution of the clergy during the Reign of Terror in France is faced with social isolation and exile. In the poem, Robinson appears as a speaker, witnessing human distress, observing a brooding "Solitary Man" (1). She does not immediately reveal his identity: instead, she describes his psychological state as fixed on thought and reflexion. The rhetorical question "What is He?" (20) emphasizes the man's indefinable and identity-less state of existence. Imagining his thoughts, Robinson fancies him saying "This world is now, to me, a barren waste, / A desert, full of weeds and wounding

thorns” (30-31). The bleak prospect of the landscape metaphorically replicates the exile’s lost sense of belonging. As in “All Alone” the speaker pleads with the fugitive to share his tale, thus suggesting the therapeutic power of story-telling to heal trauma, which is reminiscent of Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner* and his endless re-telling of his story. Robinson implores:

“Poor Traveller! Oh tell me, tell me all –
For I, like thee, am but a Fugitive
An alien from delight, in this dark scene!” (34 – 36)

This entreaty shows the need for sympathetic interaction to restore the sense of communality. Despite the melodramatic tone of the lines, Robinson seeks to show compassion by identifying with the exilic figure, thus narrowing the boundary between self and other. However, the speaker’s voice is disembodied, found outside the framework of the poem, which implies the impossibility of social bonding. The fugitive is

A persecuted Exile! one, whose soul
Unbow’d by guilt, demands no patronage
From blunted feeling, or the frozen hand
Of gilded Ostentation. Thou, poor PRIEST!
Art here, a Stranger, from thy kindred torn –
Thy kindred massacred!” (38 – 44)

What the lines imply is the religious intolerance which was part of French revolutionary activities. Robinson’s priest is one of the victims of the Reign of Terror, as Catholic priests were persecuted, banished, and murdered by the mobilized Jacobin forces of Robespierre, who sought to eradicate royalist support. The lines suggest the dehumanization of the revolutionaries, on the one hand, and, on the other, the cruelty of political turmoil. Having lost everything that anchored him to place and community, the exile’s life is a desert. The poem shows that the loss of home and family, as well as separation from society, only leads to a sense of otherness that is both external and internal.

Robinson’s sympathetic spectator cannot reach the fugitive. She evokes scripture to advocate active benevolence and humanity, and to instil a sense of universal belonging as a Christian individual:

Here, or on torrid desarts; o’er the world
Of trackless waves, or on the frozen cliffs
Of black Siberia, thou art not alone!
.....
The DEITY / Is thy companion still!” (51 – 55)

The dark, frigid, and desolate landscape mirrors the dire existence of the wandering exile. The allusion to divine grace undergirds God’s benevolence and the need for Christian ethics as a principle of communal bonding. Robinson stresses depravity as the natural human condition, echoing the Christian view of life as a vale of tears shared by all humanity:

Who, that lives,
Hath not his portion of calamity?
Who, that feels, can boast a tranquil bosom?
The fever, throbbing in the Tyrant’s veins
In quick, strong language, tells the daring wretch
That He is mortal, like the poorest slave
Who wears his chain, yet healthfully suspires. (63 – 69)

By drawing upon suffering as an inherent quality of the human condition, Robinson goes on to criticize the “Tyrant,” who, despite his power, is still mortal and cannot escape death. At the end of the poem, Robinson evokes the religious sublime to stress the equality of all people and to highlight the divisions that characterize the age:

EXILED MAN!

Be cheerful! Thou art not a fugitive!
All are thy kindred – all thy brothers, here –
The hoping – trembling Creatures – of *one* GOD!” (74 – 77)

Robinson’s allusion to God evokes some of the period’s radical writings which drew upon the religious concept of God’s grace and impartiality to suggest the equality of all people and denounce the segregation of race and nationality. It is an appeal for universal bonding and shared humanity.

The problem of war and its repercussions is further developed in “The Widow’s Home.” The poem tells the story of a widow, who has lost her husband and her little boy. The poem could be placed together with other war poetry, published as a reaction to the military conflicts of the closing decades of the eighteenth century that would continue well into the nineteenth century.³ The innocent victims of war - widows, orphans, elder sires, and beloveds, who died of grief, became the central figures of poems that sought to counter the nationalist campaigns of unwarranted warfare with a vivid representation of reality. The transference of pain onto the collateral victims of war was common for period poetry, which sought to show that war is never exclusively limited to the battlefield.⁴ Robinson’s poem opens with a pastoral vignette of the peaceful cohabitation of nature and simple folk. However, after the opening stanzas describing peace and joy, Robinson suddenly shatters this image, showing that “[t]he sweets of joy domestic” (7) are a thing of the past: the house is the abode of “the soldier’s widow” (23). The poem portrays the life of women whose domestic felicity has been destroyed by war.

The poems that thematize the ramifications of war in their dire aspects show how the public/political sphere penetrates the private/domestic sphere, destabilizing the harmony of the home and the family nucleus, as well as individual psychologies. After the loss of the husband-father, life for the mourning widow and the orphaned boy is defined by loss and ostracism. This idea is further emphasized by the marginal spaces these figures occupy in the poem: their home is situated “on the margin of a brawling brook” (1), whereas the boy is often seen to stray “On the sands / That bind the level sea-shore” (68-69). This physical liminality parallels their social marginalization. As Favret observes, in wartime poetry, “the figure of the war widow makes visible the pains of war and simultaneously challenges the exclusion of each from the public sphere” (“Coming Home” 545). Robinson’s poem, according to Favret, “put[s] the war widow center-stage, her body both doubling and replacing the soldier’s as the site of pain and devastation” (“Coming Home” 545).

The sense of loss and irrevocability is made even more prominent by the deceased father’s silence: “His tongue is mute, / . . . / His oaten pipe will ne’er again be heard / Echoing along the valley!” (80 – 83). The emphasis on the man’s muteness suggests the loss of “the balmy smile / Of peace domestic” (84 – 85) and “rural merriment” (87). This silence is also replicated in the public domain, where the father is one of the many casualties who were sacrificed for the common national cause but remained unacknowledged: “His very name / Is now forgotten! for no trophied tomb / Tells of his bold exploits” (87 – 89). It is nature that mourns the soldier’s death and pays tribute to his memory:

Yet, on his grave,
The unmask’s resting place of Valour’s Sons,
The morning beam shines lust’rous; the meek flow’r
Still drops the twilight tear, and the night breeze
Moans melancholy music! (92 – 96)

³ For details, see, for example, J. R. Watson.

⁴ See Favret, “Writing, Reading and the Scenes of War” and Watson.

Behind the melodramatic and sentimental tone of the poem lies the same poignant critique of war, fuelled by ambition for dominance, while the soldiers recruited to fight for the national cause die in neglect and oblivion. Robinson, as speaker, exclaims that to her these scenes of death, loss and natural simplicity are “dearer far” (98) and more precious than the “gilded Palaces” (103) and “rich ruby, blushing on the breast, / Of guilty greatness” (106-107). She embodies the sympathetic spectator as narrator, empathizing with the plight of the destitute family. Robinson’s use of sentimental discourse aims to stress the need for sympathetic engagement with the victims of war, both primary and collateral, strengthened by the descriptions of mourning nature as opposed to the indifference of people in power, who actually draft the civilian soldiers. Thus, the critique of war shows it as deficient and futile as it serves the ill ambition of the governing bodies, here called “Ambition’s Slaves” (92). In contrast to their self-interest, the poetic speaker’s sympathy shows the moral code of universal benevolence: “Welcome then to me – / the WIDOW’S LOWLY HOME: The Soldier’s HEIR; / The proud inheritor of Heav’n’s best gifts – / The mind unshackled – and the guiltless Soul!” (107-110).

Another poem that could be classified with the wartime pieces in the volume, “The Deserted Cottage,” presents yet another rupture in the family nucleus inflicted by war. The poem relates the story of a father and his two children, a daughter and a son. Having lost his son to war, and his daughter to the suffering for this loss, old Jacob goes mad and dies. In the poem, absence and loss are physically embodied: the cot is “forsaken” (2), “cheerless” (14) and “by all the world forgot” (3). Against the backdrop of the joyful summer full of life, the cottage stands out as an outcast itself. It is defamiliarized to suggest the marginal position that it occupies, and becomes the embodiment of the ravished home: once a symbol of the hearth and joy, of “Love and Friendship” (34) and the easy conscience of rustic folk, now nature penetrates its walls, suggesting the workings of external forces that cannot be countered – “through its thatch the northwind blows” (5) and it is shaken by tempests (6). Gradually, the poem reveals the fate of the cottage and its inhabitants. What transpires is that “Young, in the wars, the brave Boy fell! / His sister died of sadness!” (66 – 67), whereas Jacob “pin’d in moody madness” (71). The poem offers another take on the common theme already pointed out in relation to the other wartime poems in the collection: that war is not only fought at a distance but reaches the hearth, with the death of the soldier in battle precipitating death and madness back home. Thus, the physical death of the fighting man entails the collapse of the domestic sphere, which is predicated on the harmony and health of the family unit and on the individuals that are part of this unit. As with “The Widow’s Home,” the home is only depicted from the outside: this exclusion of interior space is revealing, since it bars entrance to the home itself and signifies the emptiness of the domestic realm, ravished as it is by war. The ending of the poem links virtue with sentimentality as part of the rhetorical strategies characteristic of the discourse of sensibility:

Yet, if for Truth and feeling known,
 Thou still shalt be lamented!
 For when thy parting sigh has flown,
 Fond MEM’RY on thy grave shall give,
 A *tear* – to bid thy VIRTUES live!
 Then – Smile, AND BE CONTENTED! (97 – 102)

The tear – a potent symbol in the literature of sensibility – shows the narrator’s sympathy, on the one hand, and, on the other, lends the message a universal import, whereas the affiliation between truth and feeling implies the valence of emotional responsiveness as a measure for social virtue.

Another central aspect of the “serious tales” in the collection is the response to the period’s active engagement with what Brycchan Carey has called “the age of slavery, abolition, and emancipation” (1). The 1790s were ripe with anti-slavery sentiment and rich in verse that decried the wretched state of slaves. “During this period,” Carey writes, “slavery and the slave trade were intimately bound up with British culture and society at every level” (2). Importantly, political issues were addressed using sentimental rhetoric. Slavery was used by writers as a tool to promote ideological ideas about the political, physical,

and social oppression of marginalized groups. Like many of her female contemporaries, by writing about the plight of the marginalized and the dispossessed, Robinson engaged in the heated debates on British imperial practices. Slavery was inveighed against as violating the natural human rights, but it was also considered a necessary evil on which the economy of the whole country was founded and sustained. Coupled with the women's feminist project for more egalitarian opportunities, for which Robinson was an advocate, *Lyrical Tales* is part of the socio-political discourse on pressing period matters and the various systems of oppression that limited and repressed the individual.

"The Negro Girl" first appeared as a newspaper publication. Robinson revised the original poem to relate it to the pro-abolitionist discourse that was gaining ground in the last two decades of the eighteenth century. Daniel Robinson has pointed out that "[i]n 'The Negro Girl', the white Nancy becomes the black Zelma, who watches from an African shore as her lover Draco perishes on board a sinking English slave ship" (166). The revision was made to tell a more emotionally charged story, with which Robinson "attempts to present a more trenchant abolitionist argument" (166). Robinson's choice to rewrite the poem and situate it in the context of anti-slavery campaigns was a strategic decision. "The Negro Girl," though not particularly gory in its details, focuses on the scourging of male slaves, their enchainment, and the dangers they face at sea, and on the subjugation of female slaves and their jeopardized position as potential sexual objects.

Zelma, like her marginalized position, is situated in the liminal space of the seashore, with eyes fixed on the horizon, while storm and sea are raging, pleading for her love to return, and showing no fear in the face of the natural elements. By presenting Zelma as the victim of the slave system, Robinson targets racial essentialism and the proponents of slavery and the slave trade, who attempted to justify these by racist theories, which attributed the inferiority of coloured people to biological features. The Jamaican plantation owner Edward Long, for instance, maintained that African slaves were better fitted to endure work on plantations in the tropics than Caucasians (see Kitson 94). As Peter Kitson remarks, Long "argued that 'Nature' and the 'Divine Will' appropriated the African for work in 'these climates'" (94). Further, John Kemeys regarded African people as "Barbarians, amongst who, perpetual war is raging even for the horrid practice of *eating their enemies*' and as a people 'but a few degrees removed from the ouran-utang'" (quoted in Kitson 95). Such views were hotly debated by radical writers who invested themselves in disproving the falsity and absurdity of such postulates.

Addressing nature, and by extension God as the presider over all living things, Zelma exclaims

Thou gav'st, in thy caprice, the Soul
 Peculiarly enshrin'd;
 Nor from the ebon Casket stole
 The Jewel of the mind!
 Then wherefore let the suff'ring Negro's breast
 Bow to his fellow, MAN, in brighter colours drest. (VII. 37 – 42)

Insisting on the essential equality of men as the creatures of one God, the lines level a moral critique at racial segregation, emphasizing the merits of the soul and the mind as shared by everyone, regardless of skin colour and nationality. The subjugation of blacks is thus shown to be immoral and unjust. "'Is it the dim and glossy hue / That marks him for despair?'" (VIII. 1 – 2), Zelma laments. In this way Robinson attacks polygenist theories that sought to justify exploitation, resonating with other abolitionist writers that similarly opposed them.⁵

In the poem, the sea becomes a political space which Robinson uses to show the uncertainty of the slave's existence. The slaves are exploited and left at the mercy of the natural elements and Providence:

"O! barb'rous Pow'r! relentless Fate!
 Does Heav'n's high will decree

⁵ On race as a classificatory category in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, monogenesis, and polygenesis, see Junker (498 – 50), Mellor (1 – 28), and Eigen (277 – 298).

That some should sleep on beds of state –
Some, in the roaring Sea?
Some, nurs'd in splendour, deal Oppression's blow,
While worth and DRACO pine – in Slavery and woe! (V. 25 – 30)

What is questioned through the voice of the victimized is segregation based on biological essentialism. Consonant with this is also the criticism of power relationships built on the false premise of class and wealth that give the right to oppress the weak and the poor, using status as an artificial tool for dominance. The following stanza continues the sympathetic appeal as a poignant critique of human trafficking:

Yon vessel oft has plough'd the main
With human traffic fraught;
Its cargo, – our dark Sons of pain –
For worldly treasure bought!
What had they done? – O Nature tell me why –
Is taunting scorn the lot of thy dark progeny? (VI. 31 – 36)

The gradual build-up of Zelma's indignation adds a degree of tension that further emphasizes the inhumanness of commercial practices that trade human lives for profit. The objectification of the slaves as mere "human traffic" and "cargo" – or how the white man sees them – is opposed to Zelma's view of them as "Sons of pain," which highlights the cruelties of imperialism. Importantly, pain is doubly imagined: first by Robinson as poet, and second, by Zelma. The witnessing of suffering becomes a tripartite shared experience. The focus on the suffering body, both physically and mentally, aims to elicit the reader's sympathy. The use of ventriloquization serves as a formal and ideological tool to raise awareness. The critique becomes even more pointed:

Could the proud rulers of the land
Our Sable race behold;
Some bow'd by torture's Giant hand,
And other's, basely sold!
Then would they pity Slaves, and cry, with shame,
Whate'er their TINTS may be, their SOULS are still the same! (IX. 49 – 54)

The lines lambast the imperialist mindset, focusing attention on the tyranny of white men as the exploiters of human labour and trading life as a commodity to boost the economy of the country. In this way, Robinson once again targets the nation's capitalist policies by championing the more egalitarian monogenist view of race which could be traced back to the Bible. Christian abolitionists promoted the view of all people as the children of one God and creator, despite their racial and ethnic origins. The use of the natural sublime becomes politicized when viewed as a tool of divine justice to punish the oppressors of human liberties:

Behold! the angry waves conspire
To check the barb'rous toil!
While wounded Nature's vengeful ire –
Roars, round this trembling Isle!
And hark! her voice re-echoes in the wind –
Man was not form'd by Heav'n, to trample on his kind! (XI. 61 – 66)

As indicated, the allusion to the scriptures to advance the monogenist theories of the origins of man reinforces the equality between the races and the inhumanness of slavery. The fact that this is voiced by the slave adds a dramatic quality and a stronger critique of the century's racialism. Nature is presented

as a violent power that providentially conspires to terminate the “barb’rous toil” (62). The whole poem poeticizes the discourse of the origins of the races, underpinning the equality of all living creatures.

In the poem, the objectification of Zelma as a slave girl and a woman evokes ideas about women’s position during the century and clearly links the plea for the emancipation of slaves with that of women, who, as scholars have amply written, identified with slaves as socially subjugated. The role of the white tyrant as an educator and cultivator is exposed as feigned benevolence, as it hints at an ulterior motif of possessing Zelma as an object of pleasure. Zelma intimates, “The Tyrant WHITE MAN . . . / With jealous rage he mark’d my love; / He sent thee far away” (XIII. 1; XIV. 79 – 80). Though offering her liberal education, teaching her “in the Soul to find / No tint, as in the face: / He bade my Reason, blossom like the tree” (XIII. 75 – 77), he denies her natural human right to affection. Stranded on “Afric’s sands” (XVIII. 106), witnessing the death of her beloved, Zelma plunges “in a wat’ry grave” (XXI. 126).

“The Lascar” dramatizes the subjectivity of a former Indian sailor-slave, who suffers the adversity of the society whose riches he helped to accumulate only to find himself ostracized when the Empire has exhausted his resources. As Aaron Jaffer reminds us, “lascar” was a term that came to refer to sailors, usually of south Asian origins, who were hired as labour force on East India Company ships travelling to England. The term carried negative connotations, signalling low status (Ahuja, quoted in Jaffer 1). In this sense, a lascar was no different than a slave in terms of status and treatment, with the exception that he was not owned for life as property and received a wage for his services, albeit a petty one.

During the last two decades of the eighteenth century, publications started to appear in pamphlets and newspapers, deploring the destitute state of lascars in England and, in particular, in London. A pamphlet published in 1784 expressed concern for “those poor sons of misery, who strangers to the climate, to the manners, and to the people in this country, have traversed the town naked, penniless and almost starving in search of subsistence.” “Their situation,” the writer continues, “is as singular as it is deplorable; they have been brought into this country as the friendly assistants of natives” (quoted in Visram 36). Another account in the *Public Advertiser*, published in the following year, noted the numerous neglected lascars “shivering and starving in the streets”: a situation which bespoke “a striking instance of the hard-heartedness and insensibility that distinguish the present times” (quoted in Visram 37). The remonstrance not only targets people’s negligence and indifference, but also highlights the fact that lascars were brought to England to serve the interests of the British and help the economic growth of the country.⁶ Robinson’s poem dramatizes the newspaper reports quoted above, voicing her critique from the point of view of the Lascar. She uses the Lascar to level criticism at the profligate life in the metropolis

“What is, to me, the City gay?
And what, the board profusely spread?
I have no home, no rich array,
No spicy feast, no downy bed!
I, with the dogs am doom’d to eat,
To perish in the peopled street,
To drink the tear of deep despair;
.....
And if I curse my fate severe,
Some Christian Savage mocks my tear! (25 – 36)

Robinson paints a vivid picture of the Indian slave’s destitution, while also criticizing the commodity culture of the flourishing metropolis: the “spicy feast” especially evoking ideas about spices imported from the east. Further, the idea of mock Christianity articulates a strong opinion about feigned religious virtue and the hypocrisy of people using religion as a mask and a tool. Instead of finding the empathy

⁶ The writer continues: “a race of human beings, who, though different in colour, religion, and country from ourselves, are still our fellow-creatures, and who have been dragged from their warmer and more hospitable climates by our avarice and ambition.” (quoted in Visram 37)

he seeks in his lonely wanderings, the Lascar is met with hostility by people of various strata, a priest included, and is finally killed without any justification on the part of his butcher, apart from the latter's fear that he might get robbed of his gold. The Indian's death is an act of violence emptied of all meaning, yet foreshadowed by a dream vision in which he sees his mother and notices that "from her breast, a crimson stream / Slow trickled down her beating side" (II. 183 – 184).

In the poem, the theme of racial segregation is conveyed through images of light and darkness, thus obliquely criticizing the coldness of unsympathetic Britons, as in, "There Sun and Shade delicious blend: / But here, amid the blunted ray, / Cold shadows hourly cross my way!" (46-48). By using light imagery, Robinson represents the indifference of the British by portraying them as "cold shadows," whereas the nation's racy attitude is aestheticized as a country of light which refuses to mix sun with shade as does India and its homely plains. Compared to the fairness of the Anglo-Saxons, the Lascar sees "No cheek so dark as mine," "For Europe's Suns, with softer dyes / Mark Europe's favour'd progeny" (VII. 74 – 76). The lines, as in "The Negro Girl," moot ideas about the racial essentialism discussed earlier.

Like a child torn from his mother, the Lascar is alone, alienated, and denied the right, and subsequently joy, to communal bonding to remedy the split generated by a society which has now forsaken him. This social othering affects him inwardly, which makes him introject his otherness, thus becoming an Other unto himself. As Tim Fulford has indicated, "[the Lascar] internalizes his sense of racial difference as a feeling of inferiority" (59). Resentful and disenchanting, the boy is traumatized by the unfair treatment at the hands of the "cruel Briton" (VII. 81), to whose welfare he contributed. Ventriloquizing the Lascar, Robinson lays bare the hypocrisy of the English aristocracy, the clergy, and bogus Christian individuals, thus making the Indian a suffering body of both racial and physical abuse. The poor Indian, despised and rejected by white people, begins to loathe the Sun, which is associated with both the white race and sickness: "Another day, Ah! me, a day / Of dreary Sorrow is begun! / And still I loathe the temper'd ray, / And still I hate the *sickly* Sun!" (I. 1 – 4). He associates his condition with night and darkness, both corporeally and mentally – "broad Sun! extinguish'd be! / For endless night encircles Me!" (II. 23 – 24). Thus, night, compared to the pitiless Sun of day, is a "pitying Night" offering "eternal gloom" as salvation (IV. 37, 40). Importantly, the Lascar imagines the "wide world" not as the utopian site of cosmopolitanism, which the close of the century was desirous to see, but as his "silent tomb" (IV. 38). Here Robinson's use of Gothic vocabulary powerfully renders the Lascar's affliction and the gloomy prospects of his existence. Moreover, Robinson uses allusive vampiric images, the "fierce mastiff ... / Eager to bathe his fangs in blood" (XI. 11 – 12), which suggest the cruelty of people against the Lascar, who is seen only as an object in its physical materiality.

In "The Lascar," day and night alternate but there seems to be no progress concerning the Indian boy's state. The temporal framework seems shattered by the internal agony of the wandering Indian, whose subjective state the poem dramatizes. Fulford has suggested that "[b]y having 'Was it for this' spoken by a lascar, Robinson allusively gives moral authority to a colonized, exploited subject" (58 – 59). "The Lascar," as Fulford contends, "shows that colonial exploitation began and ended at home" (57). Furthermore, the sombre ending of the poem demonstrates that sympathy and humanity could be only imagined in an England, dominated by commodity culture, imperialistic, and capitalistic zeal (60). The poem, then, coheres with abolitionist literature, seeking to make a case for reform.

In addition to the themes of war and slavery, several poems deal with the theme of patriarchal subjugation. These poems are built on juxtapositions that are easily discernible. Most of them are distanced from the present day and set in a feudal past where absolute power was exercised rigorously. In "The Poor, Singing Dame," the "old Castle" (1), a site of power, and the "neat little Hovel" (2) become demarcations of class distinctions and power relations. Structurally, "The Poor, Singing Dame" is built on binary oppositions that reiterate Robinson's implicit message: inequality stemming from hegemonic power relations and the abuse of power over the disenfranchised. Thematically, the poem deals with sexual and social oppression, and the veto on free expression – jealous of common people's joy, "For he hated that Poverty should be so chearful" (35), the Lord throws the poor, singing dame into prison – an act of banning the freedom of speech and dissevering the connection between the subject and the natural world. As Shelley Jones has noted, "the poem dramatizes the consequences of denying voice to the

powerless” (149). Robinson’s use of architectural space is significant: the castle, evocative of old feudal rule and patriarchal dominance, towers over the lowly dwelling, as a looming threat.⁷ By constructing the poem on a clearly recognizable contrast, Robinson evokes the Burkean representation of the English state and constitution as an aristocratic castle in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). However, she subverts Burke’s insistence on benevolent patriarchal feudal rule into a site of oppression, injustice, and violence, haunted by the transgression of humanitarian values and individual rights.

Moreover, the natural and the supernatural are found to coexist in the reality of this story. The use of the supernatural reinforces the discrepancy between “The Lord of the Castle, a proud, surly ruler” (17) and the Old Dame. The Lord symbolically represents the Law and the system, whereas the Dame stands for the civil citizens, suffering social inequality and gender bias under the government’s discriminations. The supernatural is associated with the cruelty of feudal systems and the abuse of power. The castle, “haunted, and dreary” (13), eventually turns mental, for these are haunts that later come to persecute the Lord’s guilty conscience:

The Lord of the Castle, from that fatal moment
 When poor Singing MARY was laid in her grave,
 Each night was surrounded by Screech-owls appalling,
 Which o’er the black turrets their pinions would wave!
 (49 – 52)

In this case, place becomes mind, and the supernatural explicates the anxieties of a transgressive consciousness, whereby the poem targets the inadequacy of present governing policies and provides a critical commentary on society and politics.

“Golfre; A Gothic Swiss Tale,” is a typical Gothic piece, which explores themes of power relations, sexual segregation, and guilty conscience, dramatized as a return of the repressed. The poem questions strict patriarchal codes. Baron Golfre symbolizes the despotic feudal lord who tyrannizes over his subjects. A precursor of Byron’s *Manfred*, the Baron’s past is haunted by a sinister unexplainable death, while his present is filled with unjustified acts of murder. The Baron’s lust for supremacy and his sexual desire know no boundaries, even when the desired female is his once-lost daughter. The main thrust of the poem is, as Jacqueline M. Labbe has put it, “the scenario of a woman victimised by the aristocratic abuse of sexual power” (“Deflected Violence” 107). The theme of incest, subjugation and female oppression, as well as the Baron’s reluctance to forgo his desires even in the face of truth, shows the egotism of governing bodies. Robinson uses Gothic machinery to move her plot forward, at the same time communicating a potent socio-political message. The imagery is especially striking in the description of Golfre’s castle in distinctly phallic symbols to suggest the idea of masculinity and oppression: the “Tall Battlements of flint, uprose” (6) throw their shadow on the valley below it, whereas the Gothic interior of the castle is full of symbols of power and prowess, such as the “banners, trophies, armour bright” (19). The character of the Baron is highly reminiscent of most monarchical figures that feigned pious devotion, yet were indulgent in their vices and desires. Despite his long orisons, Golfre’s “pray’r was little mark’d / With pure and calm devotion,” (26 – 27), for he was prone to “terrible emotion” (30), and “would howl, like wolves” (32), which suggests lust.

Contrasted with the Baron is the innocent, pious and beautiful Zorietto, trembling at every manifestation of nature’s elemental might: for example, the wind’s groan to her appears as a “clashing, steely sound, / In quick vibrations echoed round, / Like murd’rous swords, assembled” (114–116). The violent imagery suggests the oppression of women and their vulnerable status as subordinate to men’s desires and power. The ostensibly juxtaposed images further reinforce the power relations the poem dramatizes. Importantly, the use of the natural sublime articulates the despotism of a proud and wicked man: if prior to her wedding to the Baron, Zorietto was terrified at nature’s sublime manifestations, after her forced wedding, she is no longer threatened by nature but is, instead, “Unmindful of the Northern blast / And prowling wolves, devouring” (343–346). This is suggestive since it points to the greater horrors that subjugation holds for a woman. Robinson figuratively tropes female positioning by using

⁷ William Blackstone contended in his *Commentaries* (1765-1769) that the British constitutional system resembled in its fabrics “and old Gothic castle, erected in the days of chivalry, but fitted up for a modern inhabitant” (268).

commodity symbols such as “A *clasp of orient pearl* fast bound / A *zone of amber* circling round, / Her slender waist compressing” (364-366) to show women’s repression. This entrapment is further highlighted by Zorietto’s ghastly visage upon her wedding with the Baron: she appears pale, “Cold as a corpse, and fainting!” (398). The inclusion of the Lady pining in the tower (Zorietto’s mother) further reinforces the idea of a genealogy of women succeeding the oppression suffered by their mothers, and by extension, foremothers.

The Gothic setting of the poem serves as a backdrop that externalizes inward fears. It is exclusively comprised of the Gothic repertoire of storms, howling wolves and winds, haunting voices, unbounded natural forces that threaten human life and disturb domestic peace and individual liberty: the “angry whirlwinds blow / Like Demon’s dark assembled” (481-482). The poem, like the rest of Robinson’s Gothic poems, which as Labbe commented “construct a poetics of exaggeration; emotions, events, personalities are heightened and sensationalised” (*The Romantic Paradox* 103), is dominated by excess: an excess of violence, emotion and psychic instability. The externalization of extreme psychic states further iterates the operation of external forces on human life. Labbe has pointed out that nature’s agency in Robinson’s Gothic romances “function[s] not to reveal the nobility and dignity of the mind infused by nature, but to foreshadow and accompany, in their more well-known guise of the pathetic fallacy, the turbulent emotions and farcical efforts of characters at the mercy of their emotions, and plagued by villainous, human, forces” (105). The Baron, like the Lord in “The Poor, Singing Dame,” is haunted by inexplicable supernatural forces to expose his guilty conscience. In the end, Golfre dies a violent death, torn by wolves; his body hung on a gibbet, covered in blood, which offers some retribution for his crimes. Despite the vividly graphic presentation of the tale, the final stanza offers a Christian moral:

For CHARITY and PITY kind,
 To gentle souls are given;
 And MERCY is the sainted pow’r,
 Which beams thro’ mis’ry’s darkest hour,
 And lights the way – to HEAVEN! (544 – 548)

This seemingly displaced religious message is consonant with the Christian discourse and appeal for active benevolence, expressed in some of the other poems in the volume. Emphasizing the virtues of charity, pity, and mercy, Robinson ends the collection on a religious note that starkly contrasts the ungodly setting of the story, where prayer and monasticism only underpin the sadism of patriarchy. The plea clearly advocates the necessity of sensibility, transformed as virtue.

The numerous acts of abuse and injustice in the volume aim to lay bare the infirmities that haunt society, the implied patriarchal tyranny and the helplessness of innocent, vulnerable subjects to counteract unlawful treatment. Robinson’s subjects are marginalized figures that cannot become part of the social fabric or else suffer from the demands it exerts upon them. Therefore, madness, isolation, despair and death prove the foil to their existence. Robinson’s tales present two types of otherness: the one stemming from patriarchal hegemony governed by class and racial difference and the other, found within. In these poems, the two types are interpolated and the first generates its psychological counterpart. Scholars, who have written about *Lyrical Tales*, have noted that Robinson grants her characters something that society at large has denied them, that is, the power of voice and the opportunity to relate their own stories and transmute their suffering into lyrical form. Considered in terms of her anti-slavery narratives, Robinson’s giving her slave characters a distinct voice and enacting their despair as a crisis, stresses their humanity and ability to experience emotions common to all people. Such de-centring of eighteenth-century racial and social essentialism partakes in the common approach of anti-slavery verse, which thematizes “the ability to feel as an indicator of common humanity” and “that equality of feeling proves the equality of all mankind” (Carey 86; 96). By investing her sensibility in the abolitionist cause, Robinson’s sympathetic narrator aims to evoke in the reader the same reciprocal feeling of commiseration. Robinson’s use of the Gothic in *Lyrical Tales* works on a multiple level, signalling cultural, national, and individual anxieties caused by the political and social atmosphere of the age.

Fiona Stafford reminds us that “[f]or intelligent women with a strong sense of social injustice, especially, poetry offered a means to put forward strongly held opinions, and if their words were effective

enough, to influence others” (70). Robinson’s social project in *Lyrical Tales* juxtaposes questionable eighteenth-century ethos and politics, largely defined by exploitative imperialism and commercialism, so as to underscore the dysfunctionality of both. In the collection, Robinson brings to the fore the stories of the marginalized, uprooted, and oppressed figures, suffering under the impact of circumstances – the milieu that defines them, or rather *un-*defines them – and the repressive social systems, over which they hold no power.

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