Chapter 1

Introduction

In a secular and contingent world, . . . Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience. (Edward Said “Mind of Winter: Reflections on Life in Exile,” Harper’s Magazine, Sept. 1984: 54)

The history of the human race may be thought of as a record of a series of breakings of laws that govern various aspects of life such as society, culture, religion or nation. Human beings are locked up in a constant, never ceasing battle between an endless list of contradictions that they have to work their way out of. All those who dare to break the laws situate themselves on the borders. And those who occupy the borders find themselves alienated from the centre and hence exiles. In fact what actually prompts people to break a tradition, a practice, or a law in the first place is an awareness of the contested existence of borders both inside and outside the occupied territory. This creates the curiosity, the desire, or even responsibility to transgress the given boundaries, to break the age-old laws and practices, to cross over into hitherto unknown, untrodden paths and
new destinations. It is worth noting here that, without the notion of the boundary or the law itself and the prescribed limits, there can be no violation, no transgression, no breaking and without the possibility of the violation or transgression or breaking, there would be no law or limiting boundary as such.

Love, Land and Language are three areas which occupy much space and time with human beings and also exercise unlimited control over the quality of their lives, activities and thinking. Laws help society to prescribe boundaries. These boundaries are held so rigidly in the collective unconscious of people that they are almost taken to be divine imperatives. These laws are actually meant to ensure the smooth functioning of society, to maintain harmony and justice. But it has been observed often that they cease to carry out their original purpose because people become too obsessively concerned with carrying them out in the letter rather than observing them in the spirit thereof.

Excessive rigidity demands a transgression of boundaries, and often results in a breaking of laws in order to release the spirit of man from becoming a slave to traditions and practices, which have over time turned meaningless. Every society regards law-abiding citizens as good and useful people to the development and progress of the body politic. But it is also an uncontested fact that if such people cannot rise up beyond the lakshmana rekha of these laws and practices, then life can and will deteriorate into a difficult proposition
beset with boredom and dullness — a mere observance of insignificant and senseless rituals beset with life-negating activities.

Transgressing limits can spell doom and bring untold misery on those who dare to make such moves. But then it can also lead to a liberation from the meaninglessness of ‘dead habits,’ -- a setting free of the whole being from stifling, grounding rituals and customs, and fly high into the free skies like a virtual Jonathan Livingston Seagull of Richard Bach fame.

The present study is an exploration of the breaking of laws and the transgression of boundaries in Meena Alexander and Arundhati Roy. In the works of these writers, we find that the female protagonists are acutely aware of the limits set by their respective societies and often raise questions regarding the validity of these impositions. The manner in which they transgress the rules put them perhaps in an eco-feministic position within the postcolonial, postmodern discourses. The protagonists specially the women and the marginalized ones oppose all tendencies to be colonized, tyrannized by those occupying the seats of power.

The works of both Alexander and Roy deal with the post-British, Indian scenario wherein discourse was often based on certain patriarchal notions of hierarchically and strategically arranged dualisms, thereby doing away with the restorative female forces and the potential of maintaining a dynamic equilibrium amongst its people. The dualities were structured on male versus female; intellect
versus emotion, mind versus matter, objectivity versus subjectivity, white versus black, strength versus weakness etc. -- binaries wherein the first was always identified with the male and was therefore preferable. Deconstructively speaking, the list may be arranged logocentrically and it may lengthen into an endless one, thereby giving the impression that all meaning and the entire reality are included within its restricted, dualistic boundaries. But then the unbearable consequence would be that the horizon of dualities expands infinitely, thus bringing about a dislocation of meaning from any source of integration and ultimately it may result in an infinite stasis of analysis or intrusion and autonomy, or it may even result in a complete subversion of meaning and intent.

But we also find that their writings are concerned with what may be called the class of place and hence with the ideal of rehabilitation, that is, the sense that who we are and who we continue to be, is radically tied to what our “surroundings” are and continue to be. This is the eco-critical, feminist aspect of the novels under consideration. What we are is tied up with our surroundings. According to the famous ecocritic Glotfelty, the most profound implication of the ecocritical position is:

the recognition of the relation between the ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ world as imminent, and relationality or connectivity themselves as imperative issues in terms of sustainability whether on a physical or a mental plane --
and actually, on both these planes simultaneously, since the continued relation between them is the crucial issue, the crucial process. In fact the first law of ecocriticism is the relatedness of everything to everything. (Cheryl Glotfelty, Introduction, The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology xix.)

And this implies an “osmotic sense of boundaries” (Cheryl Glotfelty xx) and it further implies, what is according to Capra “a sensitivity towards the potential role of tendencies of inclusivity rather than stasis and autonomous exclusivity” (Fritjof Capra, The Turning Point: Science, Society and the Rising Culture 27). In other words and contrary to the dualistic conception mentioned, integrative forces in nature and experiences are just as vital as self assertive ones.

This leads us to the notion that boundaries are permeable in order to allow for integration as much as they offer the valuable tendency of delineation and protection. Boundaries can be conceived of as areas of the highest possible significance in terms of the intermingling of opposites and resulting in a unique integration beyond extreme autonomy, rationality or self-reflexivity.

This study endeavours to provide some groundwork and offer insights into the various aspects of how Alexander and Roy, through their works are able to convey to the readers the quality of the potential wholeness of their protagonists by their unique sense of boundaries. The overreaching strategy employed by most of the main
characters with regard to boundaries is the tendency to transgress them in order to obtain or re-enact a sense of relationality and connectivity. This strategy implies a sharp awareness of the significance of boundaries, laws, limits and the potential of the protagonists to blur out or diffuse these.

The works of Alexander and Roy reiterate the fact that boundaries, differences, barriers etc. are areas of the highest possible significance in terms of the intermingling of opposites. The beauty lies in that herein there is transgression of all kinds of categories, which tend to cross and re-traverse boundaries of all kinds as an element of their preference for movement and growth in an attempt to transcend and unify categories and to create in this way fusion, dissonance, and a renewed sense of connectivity and potential wholeness.

Another aspect that has been critically analyzed in this study is how patriarchal concepts built into all the mental and cultural constructs of society (pan Indian and cross territorial) are dealt with in the works of these writers. Patriarchy emerges as the dominant form of societal order and this has caused a gradual institutionalizing of the rights of men to control and appropriate the sexual and reproductive services of women. This kind of dominance has given rise to other forms of dominance of class and caste exercised by those of a higher order on people from lower castes and classes. The whole social order within these novels can be taken to be functioning on a
set of unstated assumptions about gender and sexuality. There is an attempt by the writers to show that these assumptions have very adversely affected the development of history and human thought. Subtle and almost subvertive as well as direct punching techniques have been used by both Alexander and Roy to work against the metaphors of gender that have very successfully constructed the male as the norm and the female as the deviant; the male as whole and powerful, and the female as unfinished, physically mutilated and emotionally dependent; the male as the possessor and the female as the possession (and the possessed). The backward, lower classes and helpless children are also bracketed with the women.

The two writers also help in the creation of a feminist consciousness through their works by considering the events of the past in the lives of their protagonists (mainly women) who are people that cannot claim to be representatives of their age. But by recording their lives as memoirs or autobiographical fiction they are in a way working against what is known as “recorded history” of the events of the past as interpreted by succeeding generations of ‘historians.’ Gerda Lerner in the Introduction to *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* calls this history as a “cultural product by which events of the past are selected, ordered and interpreted”(10), and she also goes on to say that it is in this recorded history that women have been obliterated or marginalized. But in Alexander and Roy we see a strong counter movement against this defacing of women from history
by making the protagonists (mainly women) the subjects of their own stories. These women fight hard against educational deprivation and try to create mental constructs that are pro-woman in particular and pro-life in general. They speak out strongly against being defined out of social systems that are responsible for governance. They struggle against marginalization and exclusion. They protest against the side-stepping of women from decision-making forums because of political and economic considerations.

The protagonists in Alexander and Roy are mainly women who have acquired a kind of survival knowledge necessary for the oppressed, who must tactically direct and control their fortunes in a world in which they are excluded from structured power and who must know how to manipulate those in power to gain maximum protection for themselves and their children. The readers are able to perceive that within these memoirs / autobiographical novels / essays and poems, there is constant tension between patriarchal hegemony and women’s re-definition of social situations. This re-defining has led the women to understand their possibilities; it has made them realize that they can provide an alternate vision of societal organization in which women as well as men can enjoy autonomy and self-identity.

In these works we find an alternative mode of thought for women. They are able to redefine the ability of women to be able to write / narrate their own stories through their visions, dreams and
inner experiences of their bodies and spirits. They can now without shame of reproach or feeling of deficiency, confidently talk of motherhood, both as an idea authorizing women to write, and also as the unifying concept for women's solidarity. In Fault Lines we find a confused Meena while trying to figure out what angle of vision about herself, about her life to present before the world, asking herself some questions:

What might it mean to look at myself straight, see myself? How many different gazes would that need? And what to do with the crookedness of flesh thrown back at the eyes? The more I thought about it, the less sense any of it seemed to make. My voice splintered in my ears into a cacophony: whispering cadence, shouts, moans, the quick delight of bodily pleasure, all rising up as if the condition of being fractured had freed the selves jammed into my skin, multiple beings locked into the journeys of one body. (4)

It is in such questioning that one is able to work out one's solutions to the existential problems. Here Meena, the protagonist, discovers that in her writings she had to go beyond the superfluous bombasts of sounds that hit upon the ear drums without making any serious impact on the readers, to something more serious based on one's life experiences as a woman. And for that she says:
I wanted to be more than a tympanum, a pale vibrating thing that marked out the boundaries between worlds. More than a mere line in the dry earth. I wanted to give voice to my flesh, to learn to live as a woman. To do that, I had to spit out the stones that were in my mouth. I had to become a ghost, enter my own flesh. (16)

In the writings of Alexander, be it Fault Lines, or Nampally Road or even Manhattan Music, one of the main themes that emerges is the strong mother-daughter bonding. This relationship sort of strings up the past with the present. Memories of being and doing in a past time warp stitches up fragments of the old self to recreate a new self. The present is because of the past. In Fault Lines Alexander says:

Ever since I can remember, amma and I have been raveled together in net after net of time. What was pulled apart at my birth has tensed and knotted up. Without her I would not be, not even in someone else's memory. I would be a stitch with no time. . . . Lacking her I cannot picture what I might be. (7)

The same can be said of Roy's The God of Small Things where the tragic story of Ammu, Estha, Rahel and Velutha gets unraveled through the memory of Rahel who returns to Ayemenem some twenty three years after the tragic death of her mother Ammu. Thus we see that in these works we find female protagonists appear to be consciously and constantly rubbing shoulders with themselves so as
to bring about self-exploration and delineation and to ensure a protection and also a perpetuation of themselves and their stories.

The protagonists try to move away from the restricting laws of a patriarchal society so as to authorize themselves to think and speak through creative talents or by resorting to a totally unconventional step. Some of them achieve success while others derive satisfaction in that they have put up a fight against a rotten system. In their attempts to define themselves as central, they move away from the position of the other and try to create social spaces in which they would be considered equal. The characters find themselves in a constant struggle in trying to choose between the life of a woman or the life of the mind and of course some of them like Mira in *Nampally Road*, Sandhya and Draupadi in *Manhattan Music* and Rahel and Ammu in *The God of Small Things* evolve a life style wherein they are able to combine the life of the intellect with a sexual and reproductive life.

Another aspect that has been dealt with at length is the question of the genre of writing. The texts used for this study are mainly autobiographical in nature whether they are autobiographical fiction or memoirs. Autobiographical writing, because of its rise into a very important genre of literature these days has drawn much critical attention. And it seems as though the sense of its generic conventions has begun to blur along with the very definition of the term. And we find that in spite of its simple appearance and easy accessibility to the readers, it can be as complex as the subject it is
trying to represent, and can be as various as the rhetorical expressions through which, with the mediation of the language, that subjectivity reads into the world.

Autobiography can be understood as a process through which the writer struggles to shape an identity out of amorphous subjectivity, with the psychological and the emotive dimensions of the truth gaining precedence over the factual or moral ones. The two underlying assumptions that motivate a critical study of these texts are firstly the quality of referentiality of language and secondly it is the authenticity of the self. Actually the self becomes an informing I.

Laws, borders, limits, and boundaries have always been issues that turn problematic while deciding between the extent to which these can and ought to be maintained and when and how they may be broken. This study takes up the challenge of working out or of re-working the problematics of the various laws and limitations that structure our various and multiple notions of identity -- personal, collective, generic identities. Within the works under scrutiny we encounter a number of people who are subjects that refuse to occupy a single territory -- who cross geographical, cultural, national, linguistic, generic, specular and disciplinary boundaries and create new spaces of occupancy for themselves. They defy all attempts at classification, like the banana jam made in the Paradise Pickles & Preserves Factory. The banana jam was made illegally ;
after the FPO (Food Products Organization) banned it because according to their specifications it was neither jam nor jelly. Too thin for jelly and too thick for jam. An ambiguous, unclassifiable consistency. *(The God of Small Things* 30-31)

It appears that almost all the protagonists being considered in this study are a bunch of people who also had a difficulty with classification that “ran much deeper than the jam-jelly question *(The God of Small Things* 31). For “the laws that make grandmothers grandmothers, uncles uncles, mothers mothers, cousins cousins, jam jam, and jelly jelly” (31), could not be strictly observed by the people of the Ayemenem household because, for them:

It was a time when uncles became fathers, mothers lovers, and cousins died and had funerals.

It was a time when the unthinkable became thinkable and the impossible really happened. (31)

This problem of merging and crossing of identities, this defiance of stable, well-defined classifications, this transgressive nature of everything in life seems to be the hallmark of the characters discussed here.

Breaking of laws implies crossing over of set boundaries. Such crossing involves a number of issues. Borderland inhabitants are always looked upon with suspicion for they are mainly regarded as transgressors and aliens. They have no territory, which they can
claim as their own. Transgressors can be considered as people who “step across” and get past the difficulties or they may be considered as people who walk into forbidden territory without prior permission. The first one has positive implications while the second one carries with it a negative baggage. Therefore breaking down structures of resistance and breaking of laws not only involve in Derridian terms, a breaching of the ramparts that bolster the systems of categorization, but also concerns the modifying of limits in order to transform the unknown or forbidden into inhabitable, productive spaces for living and writing. Law breakers are known to be capable of pushing their existence to as far as they can go to the borderlines, transgressing most limits of safety, acceptance, friendship and even family and personal relationships.

Such transgressive moves speak of those who are located at the cusp of two or more domains out of compulsions, necessity or desire beyond their control and also those who break the rules out of a willing choice. Often for the border inhabitant, the contested existence of borders (both internal and external) creates the desire, or even responsibility to transgress. It is well to remember that without the notion of the boundary, there can be no transgression, and without the possibility of transgression, there would be no boundary. That is to say without rules and laws there would be no breaking of these.

This study deals with the notion of laws and their breaking by such as those who question the validity of these. Though borders and
boundaries define safe territories, they pose constant invitations to those who dare to attempt a crossing over. However it is the laws within a society that prescribe the stretchable limits of desires and actions of its people.

This study is entitled “Breaking the Laws of Love, Land and Language: Meena Alexander’s _Fault Lines_ and _Nampally Road_, and Arundhati Roy’s _The God of Small Things_.” Apart from the Introduction, it is divided into five chapters.

Chapter Two of the study is entitled “Transgressing the Boundaries of Narrative Rhetoric in Autobiographical Writing.” In this chapter, there ensues a detailed discussion on the aesthetics of narrative rhetoric in Alexander and Roy. We see how the autobiographical is connected with memory, which involves the recollections of the past, and how this past is brought to bear upon the present. The present and the past then shape and in a way direct the future. We find that this kind of narrative time produces a zigzag, highly repetitive narrative structure and pattern. Time is not important in the stretch of its duration or in the frequency of occurrence but as a mode of knowledge that helps the reader to negotiate between various positions of truth. Thus the works of Alexander and Roy, taken for the study may be read as narratives that blend national history with the personal lives of the protagonists.

Another aspect discussed here is the combination of the real and the fictive, which gives the texts a peculiar flavour of historical
contemporaneity and orientational historicity. We see how the autobiographical joins together facets of remembered experience which may be descriptive, impressionistic, dramatic, analytic, together with the construction of narratives that promise both to capture the specificities of personal experience and to show how this self-interpretation is cast into a timeless, accessible, conceptualized mould for future generations.

This chapter also discusses how Alexander and Roy's use of the autobiographical to capture the quality, and shape the developments of the lives of their protagonists, becomes problematic. In trying to tell the stories of their characters through stories about themselves, they are enticed into a provocative, yet evasive adventure. At one and the same time they become creators and creation, writers and subjects of their own stories. The language of the narratives becomes both empowering and imperfect at the same time as words are not able to capture the full sense of being and their narratives explode into a maze of meanings on their own.

This chapter also deals with how boundaries get blurred between memoir and autobiographical fiction in the works of these writers. The narrative rhetoric appropriately uses memory and personalized history to highlight the voice of the marginalized which is always trying to assert its identity over and against those occupying the so called 'centre.'
Chapter Three is entitled “The Problematics of Love, Sexuality and Gender.” As is suggested in the title, this chapter deals with three major aspects of every society, which have deep and far-reaching effects upon human life both collectively as well as individually. The issues that emerge out of these can and do turn very problematic on many occasions due to various reasons. The unconscious mind and the conscious mind also come into play here. Though the unconscious exists parallel to the conscious mind it operates according to a distinct logic of its own. The conscious mind functions under the rational orders demanded by the culture, but the unconscious is the psychic domain that has undergone the arduous but unavoidable process of repression, and in order to maintain the integrity of the subject’s functioning in the world, repressive mechanisms come into play and prompt the unconscious to head for the forbidden, the restricted, and the outlawed.

This chapter also discusses the different kinds of love that exist and the various manifestations of these in the individual characters and also in their society. Here we are able to see the positive and the negative effects of love on the characters in the works of Alexander and Roy. We see how the figure of contemporary women from the middle class or from the lower classes, from urban or semi-urban settings, intellectual or lower working classes struggle to free themselves from the subject position they find themselves trapped in.
A paradigmatic feminine self is constructed through the narrator of a central domestic crisis in the works of both Alexander and Roy.

Sexuality and its impact on the characters in the works taken for this study is another issue discussed here. We see how sexuality is controlled by biology and is often seen to exist in a life-and-death struggle. Also discussed herein are the significance of taboos and transgression; and the intimate friction between the sacred and the profane. Taboos, it may be said, are meant to eliminate violence from society. In most societies there are systematic taboos on murder, rape, incest, adultery etc. But such taboos can only function successfully when individuals recognize that these prohibitions demand not to be transgressed. However, the very existence of these taboos creates a curiosity to trespass the limits they set. In the works of Alexander and Roy this natural impulse of man to violence, eventually leads the protagonists to rebel against the restrictions laid down by custom. Taboos, laws, rules, borders intensify the urge for sexual rebellions and tabooed love relationships.

Gender unlike sex has nothing to do with biology. Sex is a biological given but gender happens to be a patriarchal construct and serves the male tendency for domination. We see how the protagonists in Alexander and Roy raise their voices in protest against this sort of exploitation and victimization by a patriarchal order and speak out against the marginalization of women, children and those belonging to the lower classes and those from the
backward castes, from the centres of power. They question the sexual politics, and challenge the gender arrangement of traditional role prescriptions of society, because they refuse to accept the common belief of a one to one relationship between the anatomy of women and the roles expected of them except that of child bearing. Similarly they are against all sorts of prejudice based on the colour of one’s skin, one’s caste by birth, etc. In doing all this they are actually engaged in a mission of re-ordering their worlds.

Chapter Four called “Transgression of Spatial and Ideological Boundaries: ‘Home’ and Its Politics” takes into account the laws of the land that control spatial and ideological boundaries and the consequences of breaking these laws. Herein we discuss the reworking of the borders and boundaries that structure the various and multiple notions of identity. It is generally believed that there is what is known as geographic space, which is a synthesis of ‘home,’ neighbourhood, city or country as opposed to foreign and there is also psychic space where the ‘self’ and ‘non-self’ or ‘other’ etc. takes form and life. It is connected with all the emotional invocations that the word ‘home’ awakens in any person.

Home is usually thought of as a desirable, comfortable, secure place but it can also degenerate into a place teeming with all sorts of dirty politics from which the inmates long for an escape. ‘Home,’ in the works of Alexander and Roy, becomes a space often connected to self-identity and self-worth and awakens a variety of emotional
responses from the protagonists, which become the subject of the study in this chapter. Home can be a healing spot and it can also be a space that produces brokenness of the body and the spirit.

Home gathers the weight of the diasporic imagination in the exilic writings of Alexander, and in the writings of Roy it can be a composite of colonial machinations by some characters and the post-colonial responses of the victimized that refuse to take cruelty and neglect lying down. Whatever be the case, home occupies a very central and strategic position in the writings of these writers. Breaking the laws of the land will involve transgressional positions with regard to spatial, cultural, political and gender codes of that society. The chapter also deals extensively with the politics of home, which may sometimes be benignly disposed towards the members, while at other times it can exert a malign control over certain or all the members of the family.

The Fifth Chapter titled "Breaking Linguistic Barriers: Power and Solidarity through Language" deals with how language becomes a feminist issue and also a post-colonial one. We see how speech and silence become two important and powerful metaphors in the discourses of Alexander and Roy. Bound up closely with language is the question of writing and herein we see how writing becomes instrumental in offering individuals a means of transcending extreme and oppressive conditions of living. Women’s writings are so easily dismissed as “subjective” and tend to get consigned to the margins of what is valorized. Alexander’s and Roy’s writings may be taken as a
counter attempt to questioning the so-called ‘canon’, which is mainly composed of men’s writings. The question of using the English language as a ready medium to express one’s thoughts and ideas in a post-colonial, free, independent India, is also debated upon and the possibility of language turning into a flame that threatens in its rage to consume both the self which utters and the object it invokes, is also investigated into. Such considerations of women’s writings then bring one to the question of authenticity of women’s writings and the various positions that feminist writers take with regard to these issues. This chapter is primarily concerned with the kinds of linguistic inventiveness, abrogative techniques, appropriating of existing patterns of writing and other strategies adopted by Alexander and Roy to validate the authenticity of their writings. The study attempts to understand how the texts of these two writers enact an ethnographic description of the many ways a gendered body is treated and addressed by history, culture, age and class. The kind of language used in the literary texts of these writers may have a bearing upon their specific historical and spatial alignments and the choice of language need not be taken as an act of aesthetic or political option loaded with historical meaning; perhaps they write in the only language available to them in which multiple layers of culture in their society can find expression.

The Sixth Chapter is a summing up of the conclusions arrived at, as a result of the investigation.