

Motherhood, Memory, and the Making of the Self in Arundhati Roy's *Mother Mary Comes to Me*

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy's *Mother Mary Comes to Me* recasts the memoir as a form of feminist reflection, emotional reckoning, and political remembrance. The text refuses any sentimental simplification of motherhood, presenting Mary Roy as a powerful yet contradictory presence whose influence shaped the author's emotional and intellectual life. This article argues that the memoir explores motherhood as an ambivalent relation marked by care, conflict, inheritance, and resistance. It also situates the personal within the political by linking family history to Mary Roy's landmark struggle for women's inheritance rights in Kerala and her educational reform work. Through a lyrical and non-linear mode of narration, Roy transforms private memory into a critical inquiry into patriarchy, female autonomy, and the making of the self. The article concludes that *Mother Mary Comes to Me* is not only a memoir of loss but also a sustained meditation on how women inherit strength, contradiction, and unfinished revolutions.

Keywords

Arundhati Roy, memoir, motherhood, memory, patriarchy, female selfhood, feminist writing, inheritance, resistance

Introduction

Arundhati Roy's *Mother Mary Comes to Me* occupies a distinctive place in contemporary life writing because it does not merely recount a daughter's memories of her mother; it interrogates the emotional, social, and ideological conditions through which those memories acquire meaning. The memoir is shaped by Roy's relationship with Mary Roy, the formidable educator and women's rights activist whose life was marked by rebellion against family orthodoxy, legal struggle over inheritance, and uncompromising insistence on female dignity. Rather than presenting Mary Roy as a nurturing ideal or a purely punitive authority, the memoir offers a layered portrait in which intimacy and estrangement coexist.

The publication of the memoir has renewed public interest in Mary Roy's legal victory, particularly the 1986 Supreme Court judgment that secured equal inheritance rights for Syrian Christian women in Kerala. That struggle is not peripheral to the memoir; it forms its ethical and historical backbone. Roy's account demonstrates that motherhood is not simply a private relation but also a social force shaped by law, caste/community norms, education, and gendered power. In this sense, the memoir is both personal testimony and cultural critique. It invites readers to think about how women's lives are written by family history, and how they also resist that writing.

Maternal presence

At the centre of the memoir stands Mary Roy as both “shelter and storm,” a phrase that captures the emotional doubleness of the mother’s presence. She is at once protective and overpowering, inspiring and injurious, a figure whose public courage did not soften her private severity. Roy does not reduce this contradiction; instead, she allows it to remain unresolved. That refusal is one of the memoir’s greatest strengths, because it treats maternal love as a relation that may be simultaneously sustaining and difficult.

The memoir’s value lies in its candor about this ambivalence. Roy writes from within attachment, not above it. Her mother is not a symbolic abstraction but a lived force whose temperament shaped domestic life and the daughter’s inner world. Such a portrayal challenges conventional narratives in which mothers are expected to be self-effacing sources of comfort. Here, the maternal figure becomes a site of emotional education: the daughter learns resilience, anger, independence, and the cost of self-assertion.

Memory and narrative form

Roy’s narrative method mirrors the operations of memory itself. The memoir is non-linear, reflective, and episodic, moving through recollection in ways that resemble the uneven return of grief. This structure resists the orderly progression of conventional autobiography. Instead of a smooth chronology, the text offers fragments, pauses, and returns, allowing emotional truth to emerge through accumulation rather than sequence.

Such formal choices are significant because they align the memoir’s structure with its subject matter. Memory is not presented as a stable archive but as a living process shaped by loss, resentment, affection, and revision. The result is prose that feels intimate without becoming confessional for its own sake. Roy’s style is precise and lyrical, but it is also self-aware; it recognizes that any act of remembering is also an act of selection. The memoir therefore becomes not only a record of a life but a meditation on how lives are narrated.

Politics of inheritance

The memoir’s historical depth lies in its sustained engagement with Mary Roy’s legal and educational interventions. Her fight for equal inheritance rights for Syrian Christian women in Kerala was not merely a family dispute but a challenge to a patriarchal legal order that had long treated daughters as secondary heirs. By tracing this struggle, Roy situates her mother within the history of women’s rights in India. Mary Roy’s victory in court changed the law, yet the memoir and recent commentary also show how social custom often lags behind legal reform.

This tension between law and lived reality is crucial. The memoir suggests that patriarchy survives not only in institutions but in habits, silences, and domestic expectations. Women may gain rights on paper while continuing to face pressure to relinquish them in practice. By embedding her mother’s activism within the memoir, Roy reveals that inheritance is both material and symbolic: what is passed on is property, but also courage, anger, and dissent.

Mary Roy’s work as an educator further extends this legacy. Her school, Pallikoodam, became a space of intellectual discipline and nonconformity, reinforcing her belief that education should produce critical minds rather than obedient ones. The memoir thus links motherhood, pedagogy, and activism as interconnected forms of shaping the next generation.

Female selfhood

One of the memoir's most important achievements is its treatment of female selfhood as relational rather than isolated. Roy's identity emerges through her mother, but not in a simple mirror-like fashion. It is formed through struggle, inheritance, admiration, and rejection. The daughter becomes herself partly by negotiating what she accepts from her mother and what she resists. In this way, the memoir shows that women's identities are often forged in tension with maternal power rather than in seamless continuity.

This insight gives the text particular critical force. It refuses the easy binary of victim and heroine. Mary Roy is neither sanctified nor condemned. Likewise, Arundhati Roy does not present herself as merely wounded or liberated; she appears as a daughter trying to understand how love and injury can coexist. The memoir's emotional intelligence lies precisely in its refusal to simplify those relations. It understands that female selfhood is made in the midst of contradiction, not outside it.

Conclusion

Mother Mary Comes to Me is a richly layered memoir that transforms private grief into a broader reflection on motherhood, memory, and women's resistance. Arundhati Roy writes her mother not as an idealized parent but as a historical, emotional, and political presence whose life shaped generations beyond the family. By connecting maternal memory to legal struggle, educational reform, and patriarchal inheritance, the memoir demonstrates that the personal is inseparable from the social.

What makes the text especially compelling is its balance of affection and critique. Roy does not seek to resolve the contradictions of her relationship with Mary Roy; she honours them. In doing so, she offers a more truthful account of love, one grounded in complexity rather than sentimentality. The memoir's literary power lies in this honesty, while its political importance lies in its insistence that women's lives—especially women's difficult, unfinished revolutions—belong in the historical record.

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