

My Shelter and My Storm: Memory, Resistance, and Filial Ambivalence in Arundhati Roy's Mother Mary Comes to Me

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ABSTRACT

Arundhati Roy's *Mother Mary Comes to Me* (2025), her first full-length autobiographical work, represents a significant departure from her acclaimed fiction while continuing her abiding concern with patriarchy, power, and the politics of everyday life. This paper examines the memoir along four interlocking axes: the emotional architecture of the mother–daughter bond, the feminist and social commentary woven through the narrative, the lyrical and non-linear style that mirrors the workings of memory, and the larger ethical questions about love, grief, and inheritance that the book raises. Drawing on critical responses and scholarly analysis, this paper argues that Roy refuses both hagiography and bitter indictment, instead modelling a mature mode of remembrance in which admiration, resentment, and tenderness coexist. The memoir is read here as both an intimate elegy and an act of cultural critique, extending Roy's long-standing engagement with political violence and social injustice into the register of personal life writing.

Keywords: Memory, Resistance, Filial Ambivalence, My Shelter and My Storm

INTRODUCTION

When Arundhati Roy published *The God of Small Things* in 1997, she announced herself as a novelist of extraordinary sensitivity to the ways in which private trauma and public history intertwine. Twenty-eight years later, with *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, Roy turns her gaze inward for the first time, producing what she herself describes as “the memoir of a novelist”—a work in which “imagination is often more real than what is conventionally understood as reality”. The memoir traces Roy's relationship with her mother, Mary Roy, the Kerala-based educator and women's rights activist whose 1986 legal victory secured equal inheritance rights for Syrian Christian women in India.

The title, drawn from The Beatles' “Let It Be,” signals the book's central irony: Roy and her mother, as one critic observes, “never let anything be”. In this, the memoir announces itself as an act of sustained refusal—

refusal to sentimentalise, to simplify, or to reconcile the irreconcilable. Roy writes of her mother as “my shelter and my storm,” a formulation that captures the ambivalence at the heart of the narrative.

The Emotional Architecture of a Difficult Bond

Roy's memoir refuses the conventions of the genre. It does not present a catalogue of personal suffering nor a redemption narrative in which childhood wounds are healed through literary success. Instead, it offers something rarer: an honest reckoning with a mother who was at once extraordinary and wounding.

Mary Roy, known to her students as “Mrs. Roy,” was the founder of a coeducational school in Kerala—a revolutionary act in its time. She was also, by her daughter's account, volatile, demanding, and capable of “soul-crushing meanness”. Roy recounts being made to call her mother “Mrs. Roy,” a detail that captures the peculiar formality that structured their relationship. The

children, she writes, were not the centre of Mary's world; her school was. "My older sibling was a boy," Roy observes, "and my younger sibling was a school. There was never any doubt about who our mother's favorite child was".

Scholars have read this dynamic through the lens of trauma theory, particularly Cathy Caruth's work on unprocessed trauma carried across generations. Srishti Mitra and Manjari Johri argue that the memoir "shows how trauma in the text is not described directly but is expressed through Roy's silence to her mother's aggression". This silence, they suggest, becomes a mode of survival and a strategy for self-preservation.

Roy herself describes the price of this inheritance with characteristic candour. The emotional legacy of her mother, she writes, was a "cold moth" on the heart—a permanent chill that shaped her choices in love, work, and life. "The price I paid for being Mother Mary's daughter and the writer that I am," she concludes, "was not prison or persecution (although there was some of that, too). It was catastrophic heartbreak".

Feminist Inheritance and Political Consciousness

Yet Roy's memoir is not simply a story of damage. It is also a story of inheritance—not of property or money, but of a particular kind of defiance. Mary Roy's 1986 Supreme Court victory was a landmark moment in Indian feminist history, securing for Syrian Christian women the inheritance rights they had been denied under the Travancore Succession Act. But for Roy, the significance of this achievement lies not in the legal outcome alone but in what it reveals about her mother's character.

Mary Roy's "rage and unpredictability," as scholars have noted, "was the secret to her success in a patriarchal society unaccustomed to seeing a woman soar to great heights while rejecting cultural roles designed to clip her wings". Her refusal to accept the terms set for her by family and society becomes, in Roy's telling, the template for her own political awakening.

Roy has been explicit about this connection. Speaking about the book, she noted that she wrote it while "the genocide in Palestine was unfolding," and that the memoir was composed "looking at it, not looking away from it". The personal and the political are not separate registers in Roy's work; they are mutually illuminating. The memoir, one reviewer observes, "builds worlds that are revolutionary, made from the darkness that she spins into purpose".

Narrative Form: Memory as Structure

Roy's memoir eschews chronological narrative in favour of a structure that mirrors the workings of memory: non-linear, digressive, and associative. Reshmi C R, in a critical reading of the text, identifies this as one of its defining features, arguing that Roy's "lyrical and non-linear style mirrors the workings of memory". The memoir moves between past and present, between childhood episodes and adult reflections, without signalling transitions or offering the reader interpretive handrails.

This formal choice is not merely aesthetic; it is epistemological. Roy is not attempting to present a definitive account of what happened but rather to understand what it meant to be shaped by a particular force—her mother—and how that shaped her life and choices. The memoir's resistance to closure, its refusal to offer neat resolutions, is a refusal to simplify what cannot be simplified.

Critics have noted that the memoir's gravitational pull toward reconciliation sometimes works against its more exciting tendencies toward irreverence and deconstruction. Roy herself has acknowledged this tension, writing that she has "thought of my own life as a footnote to the things that really matter," and wondering whether the act of writing memoir constitutes "a betrayal of my younger self by the person I have become".

Music, Resistance, and Sonic Autobiography

One of the most distinctive features of *Mother Mary Comes to Me* is its engagement with music as a grammar of resistance. The memoir's title, drawn from The Beatles' "Let It Be," functions, as one scholar argues, as a "deliberate ironic counter-text". Neither Roy nor her mother, the argument goes, ever let anything be. The song that promises consolation and surrender becomes, in the context of the memoir, an ironic refrain against a life defined by refusal.

Roy's sonic autobiography—her invocations of The Beatles, Janis Joplin, and Jimi Hendrix—serves a specific function. In the context of 1970s postcolonial India, Western popular music functioned for Roy as "a third space" in Homi Bhabha's sense: a site where "a young woman from Kerala could imagine a self-exceeding the demands of caste and the formidable mother who was simultaneously her shelter and her storm". Music becomes, in this reading, a means of self-formation, a way of imagining an alternative self beyond the constraints of family and tradition.

Conclusion: Elegy as Critique

Mother Mary Comes to Me is, in its fullest sense, both an intimate elegy and an act of cultural critique. It mourns a mother while refusing to sanctify her; it acknowledges damage while insisting on the value of what was inherited; it accepts grief while maintaining a “mischievous” and “irreverent” tone that refuses to be defined by damage.

Roy's achievement, as Reshmi C R notes, lies in her refusal of “both hagiography and bitter indictment,” instead modelling “a mature mode of remembrance in which admiration, resentment, and tenderness coexist”. This is not a memoir of reconciliation but of sustained ambivalence—an acknowledgment that love and damage can be, and often are, entangled beyond untangling.

In this, the memoir extends Roy's long-standing engagement with patriarchy, class, and political violence into the register of personal life writing. The struggles that shaped her mother—against family, against patriarchy, against a legal system that denied women their rights—become the emotional blueprint for a daughter's dissent. The battles shift, as one reviewer observes, “from home to nation, from family tyranny to state power,” but the refusal to submit remains constant.

Mother Mary Comes to Me is not a comfortable book. It offers no easy resolutions, no simple moral. But in its refusal to soften the contradictions of filial love, in its insistence on holding together admiration and resentment, tenderness and critique, it achieves something rare: a portrait of a relationship that is true to life, not because it resolves its tensions, but because it allows them to stand.

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