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Tracing Thematic Parallels; A Comparative Analysis Of *Mother Mary Comes To Me* And *Kambilikandathe Kalbharanikal*

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“She was no Sita,
Neither Urmila nor Savitri;
No, she wasn’t any holy wife-
Docile, dignified, graceful- you
Find on the pages of histories and epics:
.....
My mother lived for grass and grain;
For her kids and hard work;
For rice, a roof over head,
And a blanket to cover; and,
To walk equal with her peers.”

(From P. Lankesh’s poem “Mother”)

Two memoirs published in 2025 -Arundhati Roy’s *Mother Mary Comes to Me* and Babu Abraham’s Malayalam memoir *Kambilikandathe Kalbharanikal* (Stone Water Jars of Kambilikandam) show many thematic similarities. *Mother Mary Comes to Me* is Booker prize winner Arundhati Roy’s first work of memoir published in September,2025 by Penguin Hamish Hamilton. *Kambilikandathe Kalbharanikal* is a memoir of Babu Abraham, published by Mathrubhumi Books in April, 2025. Starting from the publishing year, the two memoirs share many commonalities. They are not attempts at glorifying or worshipping the mother figure, but ultimately become a tribute to the mother figures in the memoirs.

The Setting

The main setting of both the memoirs is Kerala. *Mother Mary Comes to Me* largely focuses upon Kottayam and its surroundings. The early childhood experiences of Arundhati Roy are primarily tied to Ayemenem, a small village in Kottayam District and the Meenachil River. She says- “Within months of being in Ayemenem, I turned into a part of its landscape- a wild child with calloused feet who knew every hidden path and shortcut in the village that led to the river. I lived outdoors and went home as seldom as possible”. (P20-21) *Kambilikandathe Kalbharanikal* revolves around a small remote village of Idukki district called Kambilikandam. Kambilikandam, an eastern village of Idukki, is a place to which poor people from Kottayam and Thodupuzha migrated, in search of better prospects. This high-range region is a palpable presence in Babu Abraham’s memoir. Both the writers are from Syrian Christian families (even though their denominations vary) and are surrounded by a Syrian Christian community.

The Mother Figure

Both the memoirs revolve around the mother- Mrs. Mary Roy, Arundhati Roy’s mother and Nadikunnel Mary, Babu Abraham’s mother. Interestingly, both the mothers are named Mary, which is the name of mother of Jesus Christ. Both the characters show remarkable similarities. Both are shown as bold, defiant, non-confirmative women who are constantly struggling against the stifling systems and structures. Even though life gives them hardships, hard to bear, they fight bravely, almost single handedly. They embody resilience and endurance and assert their maternal identities through rebellion and self- assertion. They challenge traditional expectations of womanhood and motherhood, coming out of the stereotypical tamed, docile, obedient woman image. Both are shown constantly fighting against patriarchy and other such oppressive systems. Arundhati Roy describes her mother as her shelter and her storm. The mother-daughter relationship is a tumultuous one in *Mother Mary Comes to Me*. Mrs. Roy is never shown as an affectionate mother who is cuddling her children, but she always stood as the ‘iron angel’ of her children. ‘Dreamer, Warrior, Teacher’- what is written on her grave summarizes her life. She was far from being gentle, and presented as a harsh, hard to please figure who abused and punished her children in excess, at the same time instilling in them a spirit of independence and freedom. Against all odds, Mary Roy chased her dream and built a school (Pallikkoodam), one of its kind and safeguarded it all throughout her life. Babu Abraham’s mother too is presented as a woman of strong will and the narrative clearly shows her transformation- a woman who had tried to end her and her children’s lives to a woman who dares to challenge even the catholic church or trade unions. Standing in front of the altar like a lunatic, holding a sickle in her hand , Nadikunnel Mary shouted: “I haven’t entrusted anyone of you to take decisions about me or my children. If anyone of you dare to come in our way ever again, I will kill you” (self -translation. P.37). Babu Abraham remembers his mother as his anchor and light.

Absent Father

In both the narratives, for the large part, the father figure is absent. Mrs. Mary Roy was married to Mr. Rajib Roy, a Bengali Hindu tea plantation manager, much against the wishes of her family. Mrs. Roy stayed with her husband at the tea plantations of Assam for a while and two Children were born to them- Lalit and Arundhati. Due to excessive drinking, he started to abuse Mrs. Roy and she left him and returned to Kerala with her two young children and began a life as a single mother. Arundhati Roy was just two years old when her parents got separated. She has no childhood memory of her father, and in Ayemenem she and her brother were considered as fatherless children and thus viewed with contempt, a stigma that haunted them for a long period. Babu Abraham's mother got married to Mr. Abraham in 1965, a typical arranged marriage with a dowry of Rs.1500 and 3 pavan of gold. (1 pavan is equal to 8 grams of gold). The marriage was not a happy one and the father abandoned the family in 1979 and left to Malabar in search of better prospects, leaving his wife and four children behind. Babu Abraham was just five years old when his father left them, and for the rest of his childhood and adolescence he and his three sisters were viewed as fatherless children, a title that agitated and distressed them.

Alcoholism

Alcoholism becomes a topic of discussion in both the memoirs as both the father characters are drunkards. This alcoholism accelerates the breakdown of family relationships and moral order. In both the memoirs the drunkard father abuses his wife. Mary Roy's husband, whom Arundhati Roy calls Micky Roy, was an alcohol addict. He spent all his money on alcohol and continued to find reasons to drink. This addiction to alcohol made him a total failure and a miserable figure, in Arundhati's own words, 'defeated in all possible ways' (p.174). *Kambilikandathe Kalbharanikal* gives a detailed description of the havoc done by the drunkard father- the physical abuse of the mother, violent temperament, use of foul language, breaking away of utensils and the throwing away of food. The use of foul language and physical aggression within the household reflects the toxic assertion of masculinity under the strain of poverty, unemployment or social humiliation. The women, particularly the mother figure, bear the brunt of such brutality- enduring humiliation, physical assault and psychological trauma.

Financial Difficulty

Both the narratives address the issue of financial difficulty in varying levels. In *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, Mrs. Mary Roy and her family face severe financial difficulties. After leaving her husband Mary Roy tries to live in Ooty- a small hill station in the state of Tamil Nadu with her two kids, working as a school teacher. They lived in a cottage that belonged to Mary Roy's father, who had retired as a senior government servant- an imperial Entomologist- with the British government in Delhi. She says- "We lived like fugitives amid huge wooden trunks packed full of the dead Imperial Entomologist's opulent clothes... A few months into our fugitive life, my grandmother and her oldest son- my mother's older brother, G. Isaac- arrived from Kerala to evict us. I hadn't seen either of them before. They told my mother that under the Travancore Christian Succession Act, daughters had no right to their father's

property and that we were to leave the house immediately. It didn't seem to matter to them that we had nowhere to go" (P 10-11). In the rest of the memoir Arundhati Roy presents a series of events, where lack of money affected them very seriously. If it is financial difficulty in *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, it is hunger and poverty in its extreme form in *Kambilikandathe Kalbharanikal*. Babu Abraham portrays his poverty-stricken childhood with such honesty, through vivid imagery of starvation and exploitation. The account of the days in which he spent his life in an orphanage, explores poverty and hunger as conditions that dehumanise individuals and expose systemic inequalities. Here poverty and hunger function not merely as backdrops, but as active forces shaping human behaviour, relationships and moral consciousness.

The Reunion with the Father

Both the works present the reunion with the father. The father about whom Arundhati has no memories, reunites with her in her twenties while she was in Delhi. Even then he was an alcoholic, but Arundhati and her brother liked his humour and light-heartedness. The reunion of the father and mother never happens in *Mother Mary Comes to Me*. The father, who left his family in 1979 returns home in *Kambilikandathe Kalbharanikal* in 1991, after 12 years. Even though the children were sceptical about welcoming back their father, the mother was very stern - "He is your father. Forget what he had done earlier. Physical appearance and beauty are not matters of concern". (P.151) They welcomed him back but he remained as an alcoholic.

The Delhi Days

Arundhati Roy reached Delhi at the age of Sixteen to join the Delhi School of Planning and Architecture. And it was her Delhi life that actually moulded Arundhati. To meet the expenses, she worked hard and lived a frugal life. Babu Abraham reached Delhi in 1997 and he joined Jamia Milia University for postgraduate studies in Psychology. The years he spent in Delhi were crucial to Babu Abraham as well. He worked as a part time tuition teacher and earned decent money, which he sent for the medical expenses of his mother. He also cleared the Indian civil service exam winning 497th rank. He didn't join the service, and continued to prepare aiming better ranks.

The Foreign Project

A turning point in both the narratives, is a foreign project. Arundhati Roy has won a scholarship to do a project, an urban architecture residency in Italy. More than the project, it was the scholarship amount that attracted her. She spent her time in Italy familiarising the Italian culture and learning a little of Italian language. This residency came at a crucial time in her life, shortly after she was a student of architecture in Delhi. She used this period in Florence for recovery and to begin writing, a process she describes in the memoir as being foundational to her life as a writer. Babu Abraham was selected to do a project in France to do research in social psychology. 30000 French Franc which is equivalent to two lakh Indian rupees, was the amount offered and that is what attracted him the most. But this project turned out to be the game changer for Babu Abraham as well. He made efforts in learning the French language and after

the submission of the first project report he won another project which in turn provided him with a French resident card. This fundamentally altered the course of his life. In short, these European projects were life defining experiences for the writers.

Religion

Religion and its effect on people are discussed in both the works and both of them seem to criticize the double standards and hypocrisy of established religions. They seem to suggest that the established systems mostly favour the wealthy, powerful and influential ones, very often turning a blind eye to people in distress and suffering. Both the narratives primarily talk about Christianity and its rigid hierarchical nature.

Biblical Allusions

The titles of the books evoke Biblical images. Mary, mother of Jesus Christ is directly implied in Arundhati Roy's memoir, even though we don't find much similarities between *Mother Mary* and Mrs. Roy. The title, *Kambilikandathe Kalbharanikal*, denotes the parable of the wedding of Cana (John 2: 1-11) in which Mother Mary's role is of crucial significance. In many parts both the narratives make use of Biblical images, suggesting that these ancient stories remain essential reference points for navigating modern ethical and political landscapes.

Though written in two different languages, we can find striking parallels, especially thematic parallels in Arundhati Roy's *Mother Mary Comes to Me* and Babu Abraham's *Kambilikandathe Kalbharanikal*. The mother figure dominates in both the memoirs, even though the mothers differ sharply. Yet both the narratives align in their recognition of the mother as central to moral and emotional continuity, embodying endurance in the face of adversity. The themes largely converge and at times diverge. Born out of the onrush of memories and feelings, both the works stand astonishing and often disturbing in their own independent way.

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