



Motherhood Beyond Idealization: Maternal Identity In Arundhati Roy's *Mother Mary Comes To Me*

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy's memoir *Mother Mary Comes to Me* (2025) reimagines motherhood beyond traditional sentimental and cultural idealizations by presenting a maternal figure shaped by emotional conflict, social struggle, and political resistance. Instead of portraying motherhood as a purely nurturing and self-sacrificing role, Roy constructs maternal identity as complex, contradictory, and historically conditioned. This paper examines how Roy represents motherhood through emotional authority, educational vision, legal activism, and intergenerational transmission of resistance. By situating maternal experience within patriarchal and class-based structures, the memoir challenges essentialist notions of maternal instinct and highlights motherhood as both personal relationship and social practice. The study argues that Roy transforms motherhood into a political and ethical project that extends beyond domestic boundaries, thereby redefining maternal influence as a force of cultural and ideological continuity.

Keywords: Motherhood, Memoir, Feminist Literature, Political Identity, Arundhati Roy, Maternal Authority

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Motherhood has long occupied a privileged position in cultural imagination, particularly within Indian literary traditions where the mother figure is often sanctified and equated with selfless devotion. Such idealization frequently suppresses the emotional conflicts, social pressures, and power dynamics inherent in maternal relationships. Arundhati Roy's *Mother Mary Comes to Me* offers a deliberate departure from this convention by portraying motherhood as an emotionally charged, socially constrained, and politically consequential identity. Through her portrayal of Mary Roy, Roy refuses to reduce maternal experience to sentimental virtue and instead presents it as a field of contradictions where love and fear, care and control, sacrifice and ambition coexist. The memoir thus redefines motherhood not merely as an emotional bond but as a historically shaped and socially embedded role that extends into political and institutional domains.

Roy's narrative foregrounds emotional authority as a defining feature of maternal power. Mary Roy's parenting is marked by discipline and volatility, often producing fear rather than comfort. Roy recounts experiences of harsh reprimand and emotional intimidation that challenge the assumption that maternal affection is inherently gentle or nurturing. Yet these moments are not presented as individual moral failure alone; they are contextualized within Mary Roy's own struggles as a divorced woman raising children in financial insecurity and social hostility. The memoir suggests that emotional severity becomes a survival mechanism in an environment where vulnerability threatens stability. Motherhood, therefore, is portrayed as an anxious performance of control shaped by structural precarity rather than personal cruelty. Roy's eventual departure from home at sixteen underscores how maternal authority, when intensified by fear and insecurity, can compel children to seek autonomy through separation. Nevertheless, this separation does not erase maternal influence; rather, it reinforces how deeply maternal relationships shape identity even through conflict and estrangement.

Alongside emotional discipline, Roy presents education as a central dimension of maternal care. Mary Roy's dedication to intellectual rigor and her founding of Pallikoodam school reflect a maternal philosophy that prioritizes critical thinking over obedience. Education becomes an extension of motherhood, a means through which ethical values and social awareness are transmitted to both her own children and the broader community. In this sense, motherhood transcends domestic boundaries and enters public space, challenging traditional gender expectations that confine women's labour to the private sphere. Mary Roy's educational leadership exemplifies what feminist theorists describe as social motherhood, where caregiving is institutionalized and directed toward collective empowerment. Roy acknowledges that her own political consciousness and literary courage are deeply influenced by this educational environment, suggesting that maternal impact operates ideologically as much as emotionally.

The memoir further expands maternal identity through Mary Roy's legal activism, particularly her landmark case challenging discriminatory inheritance laws against Syrian Christian women. By securing equal property rights for daughters, Mary Roy intervenes in a legal system that perpetuates female economic dependency. This activism transforms motherhood into structural advocacy, where maternal responsibility includes securing social justice for future generations. Roy's narrative thus disrupts the binary between private motherhood and public citizenship, portraying maternal identity as inseparable from political engagement. Mary Roy's legal battle is not merely personal but symbolic, representing maternal protection extended into juridical reform. Motherhood, in this portrayal, becomes a mode of resistance that confronts patriarchal institutions rather than accommodating them.

At the same time, Roy does not romanticize maternal strength. While Mary Roy's public achievements are admirable, her domestic authority often replicates hierarchical power structures. The memoir exposes how resistance to patriarchy in public life may coexist with authoritarian practices within the home. This contradiction complicates feminist celebrations of powerful maternal figures by revealing how power operates across personal and political domains alike. Roy thus refuses to present motherhood as inherently emancipatory, emphasizing instead its capacity to both challenge and reproduce domination. Such representation destabilizes essentialist notions of maternal virtue and highlights the ethical ambiguities embedded in caregiving relationships.

Gendered social punishment emerges as a recurring theme shaping maternal behaviour. Mary Roy's divorce, independence, and leadership provoke familial rejection and community hostility. Rather than receiving protection for fulfilling maternal duties, she is subjected to intensified scrutiny for defying normative femininity. The memoir illustrates how motherhood does not shield women from patriarchal discipline but often amplifies expectations of conformity. This social hostility contributes to Mary Roy's emotional rigidity, suggesting that maternal severity is, in part, a response to sustained marginalization. Roy's portrayal thus situates maternal temperament within broader gender politics, revealing how emotional expression is conditioned by social survival rather than individual disposition.

The narrative voice of the memoir plays a crucial role in redefining maternal identity. Writing after her mother's death, Roy revisits painful memories with reflective distance rather than accusatory immediacy. The act of writing becomes a process of ethical reckoning through which Roy seeks understanding rather than vindication. Forgiveness in the memoir does not emerge from erasure of pain but from contextual recognition of struggle. Roy accepts that love can coexist with injury and that maternal failure does not negate maternal courage. This nuanced reconciliation transforms motherhood from moral certainty into relational complexity, emphasizing interpretation over judgment.

The symbolic resonance of the title further reinforces this interpretive process. The invocation of Mother Mary, associated with divine compassion and comfort, contrasts sharply with Roy's lived experience of maternal authority. Yet the phrase "comes to me" suggests that maternal presence is mediated through memory and narrative rather than religious idealization. The mother returns not as a saintly figure but as a historically situated individual whose contradictions demand engagement rather than worship. Roy thus reclaims maternal identity from mythological abstraction and restores it to human complexity.

Intergenerational transmission of resistance forms the emotional core of the memoir's concluding reflections. Roy recognizes her mother's defiance, independence, and moral rigor within her own political activism and literary dissent. Even in opposition, she inherits her mother's refusal to accept injustice. This recognition reframes conflict as a mode of continuity rather than rupture. Maternal influence persists not only through affection but through ideological inheritance, shaping ethical orientation and social engagement. Roy becomes, in many ways, the ideological heir to her mother's resistance, continuing the struggle through writing rather than law.

In presenting motherhood as both burden and empowerment, Roy dismantles the notion that maternal experience is either wholly nurturing or wholly oppressive. Instead, motherhood emerges as a historically situated identity shaped by emotional vulnerability, social exclusion, and political struggle. By integrating domestic conflict with institutional activism, the memoir expands literary understandings of maternal roles and challenges rigid separations between private life and public responsibility. Roy's portrayal ultimately suggests that motherhood cannot be understood outside the social structures that constrain women's choices and shape their emotional expression.

Through its refusal of sentimental resolution and its insistence on ethical complexity, *Mother Mary Comes to Me* offers a radical rethinking of maternal identity in contemporary Indian literature. Roy's narrative affirms that motherhood is not a static moral category but a dynamic social practice marked by contradiction, endurance, and transformation. In reclaiming maternal experience from idealization, Roy restores dignity to maternal struggle while acknowledging its emotional costs. The memoir thus contributes significantly to feminist literary discourse by presenting motherhood as a site of human vulnerability and political agency, bound by love yet shaped by resistance.

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