



Trauma, Motherhood and Self-Narration in Arundhati Roy's *Mother Mary Comes to Me*

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Abstract— This paper explores the themes of trauma, motherhood, and self-narration as portrayed in Arundhati Roy's *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, a memoir that traces the author's personal and emotional story and her connection with her mother, Mary Roy. The paper aims to show how trauma in the text is not described directly but is expressed through Roy's silence to her mother's aggression. This research also highlights self-narration, showing how Roy uses her personal memories and reflections to narrate her story in her own voice. To understand the generational trauma imposed on Mrs Roy and then Arundhati and her brother shaping their self-perception, identity and future actions, this research draws on Cathy Caruth's trauma theory as discussed in *Unclaimed Experience*. This theoretical framework allows the study to analyse how unprocessed trauma is carried across time and generations.



Keywords— *Memoir, Trauma, Motherhood, Self-Narration, Aggression, Silence*

Introduction

Suzzanna Arundhati Roy is one of the most important contemporary Indian writers writing in English. She was born in 1961 in Shillong and grew up in Kerala and Delhi. She studied architecture, and early in her career Roy worked in television and films. The publication of *The God of Small Things* introduced her to international fame. It received the 1997 Booker Prize for Fiction and was listed as one of The New York Times Notable Books of the Year. Since then, she has established herself as a powerful essayist, political commentator, and activist. Her writings often combine personal experience with strong social and political concerns.

Apart from fiction, Arundhati Roy is widely known for her non-fiction writing. Her essays address democracy, environmental destruction, nationalism, gender inequality, and state violence. In 2014, many of her essays were collected by Penguin India in a five-volume set. In 2019, her nonfiction was collected in a single volume, *My Seditious Heart*, published by Haymarket Books. Some of these essays, such as *The End of Imagination* and *The Greater Common Good*, are discussed in vivid detail in

Mother Mary Comes to Me. Her style is marked by strong imagery and sharp language: “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. In the non-human category, my closest companion was a striped palm squirrel who lived on my shoulder and whispered in my ear” (Roy 21).

As an Indian author, Arundhati Roy occupies a unique place in literature. She writes fearlessly within the Indian social and cultural system, addressing universal issues such as suffering, identity, power, and resistance. Her work challenges traditional ideas about family, motherhood, history, and authority. Through her fearless voice and innovative style, Roy has become a significant figure in Indian English literature, representing both artistic excellence and social responsibility.

Mother Mary Comes To Me

Mother Mary Comes to Me is a memoir and work of literary non-fiction written by Arundhati Roy and published in 2022 by Penguin Random House India. The book, written in English, marks a deeply personal shift in Roy's writing, focusing on memory, motherhood, and trauma. Unlike a

conventional memoir, it does not follow a strict chapter-based structure; instead, it unfolds as a continuous reflective narrative divided into short, fluid sections rather than formally numbered chapters. This structural choice supports its fragmented, memory-driven storytelling style.

Roy recalls her childhood experiences, marked by strict discipline, emotional distance, and fear of disapproval, and examines how these experiences shaped her emotional life and identity. The text also explores Mary Roy's life as a strong but wounded woman who faced marital failure, social judgment, and professional struggles. Roy attempts to understand how her mother's own trauma influenced her behaviour as a parent. Even after her mother's death, Mary Roy remains a powerful presence in the narrator's thoughts and memories. As Roy herself clarifies in an interview, "This book is my conversation with her, I could not have while she was alive, and it's not an accusation or indictment or anything. It's just a conversation and celebration of what was great about her and a reportage of what was not so great about her" (Roy 4:24- 4:41).

It is not merely a memoir dedicated to Mrs Roy but also an autobiographical narrative in which the author's life is inscribed on every page. As noted in a review published in *Hindustan Times*, "Roy's magical but difficult childhood is laid bare: an absentee father; relatives who, at best, are reluctant to help a single mother and, at their most feudal, committed to disinheriting her; the great tragic figure, of course, is Mary Roy: asthmatic and mean, loving and visionary" (Shanghvi and Siddharth).

Another significant aspect of the book is its engagement with political commentary. Roy reflects on major and minor political events in contemporary India and how they affected her life and family, interweaving national history with personal memory. She articulates her political views without hesitation. As Dharmendra Kumar Singh observes in his review, "The memoir by Roy is a non-fictional piece of writing that, in its extraordinary way, is made of the pulse of a memoir, the intimacy of a diary, and the urgency of a political testimony in a single design" (Singh 2).

The book was written after Mrs Roy's death in 2022 and functions as a tribute that acknowledges her enduring presence in Arundhati Roy's emotional and intellectual life. Singh further remarks: "*Mother Mary Comes to Me* (2025) is circular. It starts when life stops, when the mother is dead, and it stops where life starts, where she recalls the departed soul of whom she is to pass her rest life. The whole text is haunted by the shadow of the same loss" (Singh 2).

Mother as the Central Figure

In *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, Arundhati Roy clearly portrays Mary Roy as the central character around whom the entire narrative revolves. Although the memoir is written in the first person, the emotional, thematic, and narrative focus repeatedly returns to Mary Roy. The title itself suggests her dominance; "Mother Mary Comes to Me" implies that, even after death, the mother remains a powerful psychological and emotional presence. The memoir becomes less of an autobiography and more a portrait of a woman whose life shaped everyone around her.

As a child, Mary Roy is shown struggling within a rigid and violent patriarchal household. Arundhati Roy recalls that her grandfather "whipped his children, turned them out of the house regularly, and split my grandmother's scalp open with a brass vase" (Roy 11). This traumatic upbringing made the foundation of Mary Roy's later personality, which was marked by her strength, emotional hardness, and determination to escape oppression. By talking about these childhood experiences, Arundhati places her mother not simply as a strict parent but as a wounded child shaped by fear and authoritarian control.

As a wife, Mary Roy's life was one of struggles. Against her family's wishes, she married Rajib Roy, a Bengali Hindu tea plantation manager, and lived for some time on Assamese tea estates, where her children Lalith (L.K.C.) and Arundhati were born. However, the marriage turned out to be dysfunctional due to her husband's alcoholism. Arundhati Roy describes him as "defeated in all possible ways" (Roy 174). His addiction leads to abuse and instability, forcing Mary Roy to leave him and return to Kerala as a single mother. By narrating this decision as an act of courage rather than failure, Roy places her mother at the centre of a battle against both domestic abuse and social stigma.

Mary Roy's struggles as a sister further highlight her central role in challenging oppressive systems. Under the Travancore Christian Succession Act, daughters were denied equal inheritance rights. When she attempted to claim her share of family property, her male relatives resisted, asserting that she had no legal entitlement. Her eventual legal battle for equal property rights was not only a personal fight but a landmark challenge to patriarchal law. Through detailed reflection on this episode, Arundhati Roy presents her mother as a historical figure who reshaped legal and social norms.

Financial hardship defined Mary Roy's journey. After her divorce, she struggled to survive as a schoolteacher in Ooty while raising two children with limited support. The family experienced insecurity and social discrimination, particularly because the children are

viewed as “fatherless.” Mary Roy later established Pallikkoodam, a progressive school in Kerala, and devoted her life to sustaining it. The inscription on her grave, “Dreamer, Warrior, Teacher”, summarises the roles she embodied. Arundhati's narration emphasises these achievements, reinforcing her mother's position as the memoir's driving force.

At home, Mary Roy is portrayed as an “iron angel”, stern, demanding, and often emotionally severe rather than conventionally affectionate. She disciplined and criticised her children harshly, yet also instilled in them independence and intellectual courage. Arundhati Roy repeatedly returns to this dual image: her mother as both a shelter and a storm. This tension shapes the memoir's emotional core and confirms Mary Roy's centrality in the narrative.

Thus, through detailed recollection of her mother's struggles as a child, wife, sister, professional, and single mother, Arundhati Roy constructs *Mother Mary Comes to Me* as a tribute, critique, and exploration of one dominant personality. Even when narrating her own experiences, Roy frames them in relation to her mother. Mary Roy remains the axis of memory, conflict, resilience, and transformation—undeniably the central character of the text.

Autobiography

Arundhati Roy's *Mother Mary Comes to Me* (2025) is her first memoir, weaving personal history with introspective narration to explore her life shaped by her mother, Mary Roy. It blends raw family dynamics, childhood trauma, literary success, and political awakening through first-person accounts and direct textual evidence hence making it an eminent autobiographical work.

An autobiography is a self-written account of one's own life, which is written by themselves, providing a first-person perspective on the author's experiences, memories, and insights. This genre allows people to share their own point of view and stories, offering readers a glimpse into the author's personal journey and the historical or cultural context in which they lived.

Autobiographical elements dominate the memoir as Roy recounts verifiable life events from her Kerala upbringing to global fame. The narrative shows her childhood in Ayemenem, homeschooled with her brother in poverty and family feud, stories from real locations that inspired *The God of Small Things*. She details her mother's legal battle against the Travancore Christian Succession Act, which Roy won in India's Supreme Court, granting daughters inheritance rights which was a factual milestone that portrays Mary Roy's radical feminism. Roy narrates her journey to writing, from early screenwriting to the 1997

Booker Prize for *The God of Small Things*, including the “whirlwind success” and backlash labelling her as a “seditious, traitor-writer.” These events are not fictionalized; they anchor the book in Roy's documented biography, such as her activism on Kashmir, Naxalism, and dams.

Direct evidence includes her post-success “rubble”: “As my personal life turned to rubble... it was politics - and anger - that held me together,” mirroring documented life transitions. Mary's death at 89 bookends the narrative: “More than a daughter grieving her mother, I grieve as a writer who has lost her most captivating subject.”

Self-Narration Style

In *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, Arundhati Roy uses self-narration to examine how her childhood experiences with her mother, Mary Roy, shaped her identity, emotional outlook, and, later, her capacity to forgive. The memoir is not just a recollection of events but a reflective exploration of how those experiences shaped her own personality.

Roy often revisits traumatic childhood events and connects them directly to her adult experiences. For example, she recalls watching her brother being beaten for bringing home an “average” report card and later reflects, “On the occasions when I am toasted or applauded, I always feel that someone quiet is being beaten in the other room” (Roy 43). This shows how fear and performance-based approval formed her relationship with success. Praise becomes tied to guilt and anxiety, proving how deeply childhood discipline influenced her inner world.

She also recounts the repeated verbal humiliation she endured: “‘I wish I had dumped you in an orphanage,’ ‘You're a millstone around my neck,’ ‘All my sickness is because of you’ and, of course, ‘Bitch’” (Roy 345). Through self-narration, Roy demonstrates how these words became deeply embedded, forming an inner voice that affected her confidence and sense of self. Yet she does not present herself only as wounded; she recognises that her strength and rebel were also shaped as an answer to this environment.

Importantly, Roy's narration gradually shifts from anger to understanding. As she reflects on her mother's violent childhood, her father, who “whipped his children... and split my grandmother's scalp open with a brass vase” (Roy 11), she begins to see Mary Roy's cruelty as inherited trauma rather than pure evil. This recognition allows empathy to come over. The nonlinear structure of the memoir shows this process: memories surface after her mother's death, showing that the past continues to “come” to her, just as the title suggests.

By revisiting these experiences, Roy changes unconscious pain into conscious reflection. Forgiveness in the memoir does not omit the bad experience; instead, it grows from understanding the real roots of that wound. Through self-narration, Arundhati Roy reclaims her story, acknowledges how trauma shaped her personality, and ultimately makes peace with her mother by seeing her as both flawed and wounded.

Understanding *Mother Mary Comes to Me* through Cathy Caruth's Trauma Theory

In *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, Arundhati Roy presents trauma not as a single catastrophic incident but as an inherited emotional condition that passes silently across generations. The memoir explores Roy's complex relationship with her mother, Mary Roy, revealing how unresolved suffering becomes embedded within family structures. Trauma in the text operates at multiple levels: Mary Roy's childhood within a rigid patriarchal Syrian Christian household in Kerala, her troubled marriage, her legal battles over inheritance, and the emotional consequences experienced by her children, Arundhati and Lalith (L.K.C.). Through fragmented narration and reflective memory, Roy illustrates what Cathy Caruth defines in *Unclaimed Experience* as the "belated return of unassimilated experience".

Mary Roy's early life was shaped by authoritarian discipline and domestic violence. Roy recalls how her grandfather "whipped his children, turned them out of the house regularly, and split my grandmother's scalp open with a brass vase. It was to get away from him, our mother told us, that she married the first man who proposed to her" (Roy 11). This memory reveals trauma as a foundational force rather than an isolated event. Mary Roy's later rigidity as a mother reflects what she had inherited as a daughter. Caruth argues that "trauma is not fully grasped in the moment of its occurrence; it returns later in indirect and repetitive ways" (Caruth 4). Mary Roy's emotional hardness and strict discipline can therefore be read as repetitions of unprocessed childhood fear.

Another significant source of trauma was Mary Roy's unequal position within the patriarchal inheritance system governed by the Travancore Christian Succession Act. Roy remembers how her grandmother and uncle arrived to drive them away, declaring that "daughters had no right to their father's property" (Roy 11). This legal and familial rejection intensified Mary Roy's sense of exclusion and injustice. Although she later fought a historic legal battle for equal inheritance rights, the struggle deepened familial rifts. Caruth writes that trauma is "the story of a wound that cries out" (3), and Mary Roy's legal activism

can be interpreted as such a cry, a response to an earlier unacknowledged wound.

Mary Roy's failed marriage further added to her trauma. After separating from her husband, she returned to Kerala with her children, facing social stigma and economic instability. Roy describes how even the family cook would mutter about "the shamefulness of having fatherless children living under the same roof as decent people," and how most arguments revolved around money and accusations that her mother was not "earning her keep" (Roy 19). These humiliations hardened Mary Roy's personality. Survival required resilience, but that resilience manifested as emotional guardedness. Trauma thus transformed into discipline and control within the household.

The memoir suggests that this unresolved trauma was transmitted to the next generation not through overall violence but through emotional atmosphere. Roy recalls living in constant fear of displeasing her mother, describing how she watched through a keyhole as her brother was beaten for receiving an "average" report card. She reflects, "On the occasions when I am toasted or applauded, I always feel that someone else, someone quiet, is being beaten in the other room" (Roy 43). This haunting image exemplifies Caruth's concept of "belatedness", which suggests that trauma reappears in later experiences, detached from its original context. Even success triggers anxiety because it is tied to earlier punishment.

The persistence of verbal humiliation further illustrates this internalised trauma. Roy recounts the "litany" of insults: "'I wish I had dumped you in an orphanage,' 'You're a millstone around my neck,' 'All my sickness is because of you' and, of course, 'Bitch'" (Roy 345). These statements echo long after childhood, resurfacing during adulthood and even after Mary Roy's death. The title itself *Mother Mary Comes to Me* suggests this psychological return. The mother continues to "come" not physically but through memory and internalised voice.

The fragmented structure of the memoir reinforces Caruth's theory that trauma disrupts linear narrative. Roy does not recount events chronologically; instead, she moves between childhood and adulthood, past and present, allowing memories to surface unpredictably. Caruth argues that trauma "is not locatable in the simple violent or original event" but in its repeated return (4). Roy's non-linear storytelling mirrors this pattern of recurrence. For example, she describes an intense emotional reaction to witnessing a newly married couple's affectionate behaviour, admitting, "On the third day I nearly ran out of the house into oncoming traffic. I didn't know what had upset me so much" (Roy 25). The reaction is disproportionate to the

present moment, signalling an earlier unprocessed emotional disturbance resurfacing unexpectedly.

Caruth also emphasises that trauma is relational, affecting not only the individual who experiences it but also those connected to them (92). In Roy's memoir, Mary Roy's suffering shapes her children's emotional lives. The generational transfer of trauma becomes evident as patterns of fear, anger, and emotional distance repeat across time. Mary Roy inherited strict authority and silence from her father; she then transmitted discipline and emotional severity to her children. Trauma thus moves historically and familiarly rather than remaining confined to one life.

The act of narration becomes Roy's attempt to "claim" what had remained unclaimed. By revisiting painful memories, she confronts experiences that were once overwhelming or misunderstood. Caruth suggests that storytelling allows trauma to be acknowledged rather than endlessly repeated (Caruth 3–4). In this sense, the memoir itself functions as a process of working through inherited pain. Roy's reflective voice does not simply accuse or condemn; it seeks to understand how trauma has travelled through generations.

Ultimately, *Mother Mary Comes to Me* demonstrates that trauma is not a singular event but a continuous, relational wound that shapes identity, memory, and family dynamics. Through fragmented narration, belated recollection, and repeated return to childhood scenes, Roy's memoir embodies Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. The text reveals how inherited silence and unprocessed suffering persist within the mind, and how narrative becomes a means of transforming that inherited wound into conscious memory.

Conclusion

This paper examines *Mother Mary Comes to Me* to understand how trauma is represented in the text, how motherhood is portrayed as outside societal ideal frameworks. It probes how self-narration enables the reconstruction of identity. Based on the analysis undertaken in this study, it becomes clear that the memoir answers these questions not through linear storytelling, but through emotional returning to the experiences. It becomes evident that trauma in the memoir is not related to any specific. Instead, it is represented as a continuous re-visitation of unpleasant past experiences, even in the present. Mary Roy's childhood memories, marked by authoritarian control, domestic abuse, and emotional suppression, shape her adult personality. Her failed marriage, financial instability, and social stigma further deepen her emotional stubbornness. This unhealed trauma shows up in her parenting style by replacing tenderness with discipline,

ambition replacing emotional reassurance, and criticism becoming a tool of control. Through memory coming back in bits and pieces or as a whole and its repetition, and non-linear narration, Arundhati Roy clearly portrays how trauma comes back to the surface later and demands recognition. The narrative structure itself mirrors the workings of traumatic memory, thereby proving the validity of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory.

The paper also focused on how motherhood is revealed in the memoir. It challenges orthodox constructions of what an "Indian mother" should be. Mary Roy is neither self-sacrificing nor emotionally soft. She is fiery, ambitious, stubborn and rigid. She builds Pallikoodam, fights inheritance laws, thrives in social stigma, and raises two children as a single mother in a society that despises mothers like her who stay away from husbands. Yet, alongside her strength lies her emotional severity. The study aimed to show how Roy presents motherhood as a complex role that nurtures independence while also causing emotional wounds. By refusing to romanticise her mother, Roy disrupts stereotypical representations of maternal virtue and instead portrays motherhood as historically and socially conditioned. Roy's act of writing becomes a means of reconstructing her identity and regaining her own voice. The memoir blends personal reflection, political awareness, fragments of memory, and poetic imagery. Roy places herself not merely as a daughter shaped by her mother's authority, but as a conscious narrator interpreting that past. Self-narration allows her to analyse the inherited wounds critically rather than remain caged in it. Writing becomes an act of taking the power back. The fragmented structure reflects the instability of memory, but the very act of assembling these fragments into narrative form signifies psychological integration.

The memoir is not an accusation against her mother but an attempt to understand, reconcile with, and make peace with her. Roy does not hide the emotional trauma she experienced. Her transition from resentment to empathy shows how the author matures as her perspectives shift.

Mother Mary Comes to Me is about how one can make peace with uncomfortable situations and learn to see through them clearly. It shows how trauma quietly shifts from one generation to the next, how love and hate can coexist in the same relationship, and how telling one's story or recounting past bad experiences can become a path towards healing. Caruth's Trauma theory sheds light on the complexity of motherhood and the power of self-writing. Through her memoir, Arundhati Roy transforms personal history into reflective understanding.

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