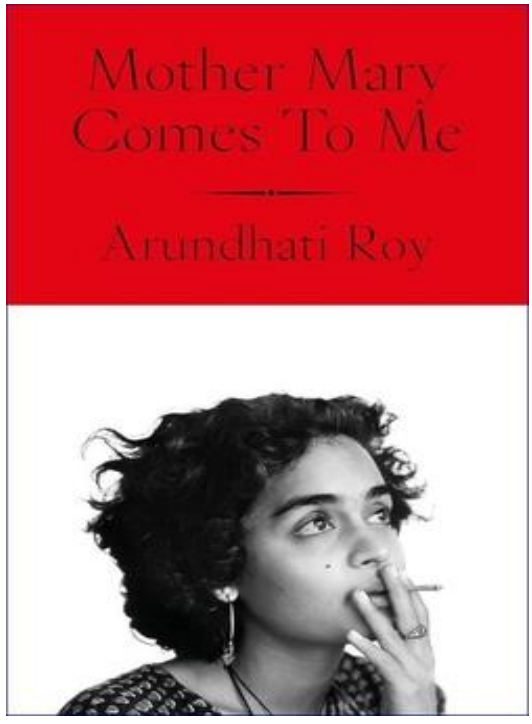
Arundhati Roy, *Mother Mary Comes To Me*. New Delhi: Penguin Random House India, 2025. 374 pp. ISBN 978-0-143-47306-0.



Arundhati Roy's memoir *Mother Mary Comes To Me* is a gripping account of the genesis and development of a self-consciously political author. Like many others, though, Roy does not believe in the idea of a political author or a writer-activist, which she finds "absurd" (268). The book is also an ethnographic record of a time and a culture that offers insights into aspects of Kerala ethnic life where she went through a tumultuous childhood and adolescence, and of some facets of the modern Indian nation-state from the late-1970s onwards, when she stepped into her youth. Roy's signature prose, mesmerizing and lyrical, her haunting style, with glimpses of magic realism, do not take the edge off the perilous history of her personality and activities, as recounted in this volume. Instead, they accentuate the trauma of physical and emotional eviction at multiple levels. The memories of eviction from the car or the house by her parents, especially by the single mother, during childhood and by other family relations later haunt the first half of the narrative. Those of solidarity with the disenfranchised, uprooted from their land and culture by the paternalistic government—or the mother nation—in a drive for "development," are central to its latter half. In the process the

personal seamlessly glides into the political. A veritable emotional, political, and creative autobiography masquerading as a breezy memoir, it is also laced with a maze of intertextuality comprising innumerable literary and non-literary works, including some of Roy's own.

The book apparently is a tribute to the author's maverick, mercurial mother, an educator, entrepreneur, and women's rights activist. A cosmopolitan lady who grew up in Delhi, studied in Madras, was married in Calcutta and lived in Assam before settling in rural Kerala, she sensitised her daughter to the Vietnam war and the history of slavery, taught her among other things Shakespeare, Kipling, and A. A. Milne, read her parts of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (1960), the opening passage of *Lolita* (1955), and sang Paul Robeson's "Ol' Man River." Which parent, or relation, would better deserve a tribute? Yet, commenting on her own passion for language and reading, the narrator would retrospectively observe the limits of her mother's literary canon that was "dominated by white male writers" (143). Mrs. Roy, whom she describes as "my shelter and my storm" (8), also trained her in the art of writing, taught her to be free and simultaneously raged against her freedom. She taught her to write and resented the author she became. Indeed, it is the complexities and difficulties of the narrator's relationship with her mother, which are essential to this narrative. Volatile and profoundly formative, it acts as the background score in a lifelong movie.

Yet, it is not the movie per se. The central figure in the book is not "Mother Mary," but "Me," the author-narrator, whose travails in a quasi-picaresque drifting life form its crux. The mother is inarguably the second most important character in the movie, but there are innumerable others, including the Rhodes scholar Marxist brother, the "Nothing Man" father, a band of ordinary co-feminist women dotting her childhood, and above all, a series of friends from various walks of life: strangers, classmates, teachers, writers, fellow workers, co-artists, co-protesters, and comrades among others. Indeed, describing herself as a person of "vagrant mentality," she also speaks eloquently on her reliance on friendship. Elsewhere, this activist and committed artist calls herself an "off-grid drifter" who seeks refuge in the indifferent anchorage of the moment:

> The more… we club each other to death with our genes, our gods, our flags, our languages, the colour of our skin, the purity of our roots, the histories both true and false—the more my answer to that question remains the same. *I'm here now*. It isn't a slogan or a solution to anything. Just the personal feelings of an off-grid drifter. (128, emphasis original)

How much of this detachment, this state of the floating flaneur, is a product of the emotional rootlessness induced by a troubled early life presided over by "Mrs Roy," and not "mother," and how much of it is a textual performance, a play around self-projection central to memoirs and autobiographies, is for the future researcher to figure out.

There is, for example, far too little acknowledgement of how incredibly privileged in terms of class and social location the author's formative life has been, not necessarily financially, but in terms of social and cultural capital accumulated over generations. From the "Imperial Entomologist" grandfather to "one of India's first Rhodes scholars" brother and others in between, a line of family people and their associations contributed to this crucial pre-history. What role did her location in the cosmopolitan multilingual middle class in a radically class-divided India play in her negotiations with the memories of a traumatic early life and her later struggles as a brave, successful woman in a rabidly patriarchal "India, my dear"? Isn't her activist involvement in the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement) and with the Naxalites, as recorded here and in innumerable other brilliant journalistic and polemic writings, essentially directed against the dominant development narrative orchestrated by her own class? As she astutely observes on the reception of her own piece "The Greater Common Good," it "unsettled many people's notions of what a writer's role in society should be…. The pro-dam lobby raged against it and called it fiction. But even people who claimed to be on our side were uncomfortable" (264-65). The only common ground shared by these quarters is their social location: the Indian urban multilingual minority.

For a writer hailing from that class to be able to strike a balance between this class identity and a resistance politics essentially geared against this identity is an enormous task. The crises of self-definition it engenders also informs the fluid generic character of this text and the nature of its narrativity and authorship: we begin to wonder whether it is a memoir, an autobiography, a work of non-fiction peppered with elements of fiction or the other way round. How does one make sense of the apparent contradiction between two statements made by the author in a span of five pages recounting her participation in the Narmada Bachao Andolan: "My commitment was to writing. To being a writer, not a leader or an activist" (264) and then "I was soon being called a 'writer-activist', a term I found absurd because it suggested that writing about things that vitally affected people's lives was not the remit of a writer" (268)? One is compelled to speculate if this is a paradox, an evolution, or an ideological shift. It is also challenging to approach the dynamics of this profoundly painful commitment and the émigré vagrant sensibility that the author claims to possess. Also, how can that problem

and its potential resolution help us read Roy's aesthetics and politics better in the context of her corpus? Can one read this conflict as an extension of her dispassionate narrative act of referring to her mother as "Mrs. Roy" all along? Given the intensely "personal" nature of the narrative, especially in its early part dealing with the vulnerabilities and struggles of a girl child, occasional lapses into sentimentality and melodrama were always on the cards. "Mrs Roy" probably also saves the author-narrator from such pitfalls, by and large.

As we progress, Mother Mary increasingly evolves into a ubiquitous emotional presence, with the author's own personality and her work and activism gradually taking the centre stage. The neo-imperial Indian economy, the associated logic of developmental modernity and its pathologies, the Kashmir problem, the persecution of indigenous minority communities—especially Sikhs and Muslims—before and after the rise of a jingoist ultra-nationalism, the complex functioning of the modern nation-state with all its repressive and ideological state apparatuses, the role of the writer in this debilitating habitus, especially that of a woman writer waging an additional battle against an all-pervasive patriarchy, and the author's own experiences of persecution by various authorities, are some of the subjects taken up for nuanced, sensitive, riveting treatment. Throughout this journey, the senses of evacuation, vulnerability, and vagrancy developed in early life inform the authorial sensibilities, anchoring her lifelong identification with positions of precarity and marginality, her aesthetics and politics of solidarity and commitment.

All these experiences also frame the political, cultural, and emotional contexts of the production and reception of many of her texts, as discussed or gestured at throughout the book. They also clear space for readers to both contextualise the texts and problematise their author's versions about them. That, for me, is the biggest takeaway from this compelling book. It can help us draw the coordinates to navigate through the world of Arundhati Roy from multiple perspectives: social, political, psychological, emotional, ethnological, literary, forcing us all the while to revisit conventional boundaries between the private and the public, the creative and the polemic, and the author and the activist. This book, to my mind, is going to occupy a pivotal position in Arundhati Roy scholarship.

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