

**Arundhati Roy. *Mother Mary Comes to Me*. Kochi: Penguin Random House, 2025. 374 pp. ISBN: 9780143473060.**

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*Mother Mary Comes to Me* is a much-anticipated book by Arundhati Roy. A memoir of her relationship as a daughter with her ‘gangster’ mother, Mary Roy, the book comes in the aftermath of her mother's death in 2022. Roy writes to immortalise her mother's all-encompassing presence in her life, filled initially with rebellion, only to be replaced with love and reverence. Neither a biography, confession, nor entirely a memoir, Roy’s book extends her on-going project: fusing the private and the political into one unified narrative. Her seamless integration of the personal, familial, and national-political, and the way she shows how life inspires art, particularly distinguishes her latest work within this genre of writing.

In the opening chapter, Roy offers an insight into the significance of her mother to her—the most enthralling subject to her writerly self. The subsequent chapters take us through the author’s experiences, where her mother appears at once as gangster, shelter, and storm. With each chapter, Mrs Roy emerges as a figure often portrayed as stern, exacting, and uncompromising—not only with her daughter but with those around her. She comes across as both a taskmaster and a woman unafraid to challenge norms, as demonstrated in her legal battle challenging the Travancore Christian Succession Act in the Supreme Court of India. Together, the mother-daughter duo stands out—Mrs Roy as a formidable presence and Arundhati Roy, winner of the National Award and the Booker Prize, as a distinguished and talented literary figure.

However, Roy's love and hate for her mother are portrayed as volatile. At times, Mrs Roy's temper is described as irrational and uncontrollable, as she belittles young Roy by mimicking, abusing, or bullying her. But it is to this same mother that Roy confides in about her first love—her boyfriend JC—and it is this same mother who buys a refrigerator for her daughter. If one were to hate her, one would not confide in her, especially after not speaking to each other for seven years at a stretch. In the remaining pages, Roy shows how most of her life decisions were shaped by either opposing or affirming her mother's upbringing.

This complicated inheritance of love and fracture does not begin with Mary alone. Roy's maternal grandfather, who worked for the British in Delhi as an Imperial Entomologist, also had a severed relationship with his wife and children. In a not-so-different manner, Mrs Roy experienced a similar rupture, and when it was Roy's turn, she chose not to give birth but to abort the child she had conceived. Such instances point to the generational trauma running through the family, and how Roy navigates it. What truly stands out is her endearing portrayal of her brother Lalith Kumar Christopher Roy (LKC) and her maternal uncle G. Issac, the first Indian Rhodes Scholar on Greek and Roman mythology, as reminders that family history is as much about male figures of vulnerability as about maternal authority.

Interestingly, Roy's self-representation as a despised and despondent figure contrasts with her cultural capital—education, language, networking, and opportunities. Roy writes, “especially each time I was at a crossroads and had to make a decision. My education, the class I came from, and the fact that I spoke English protected me and gave me options that millions of others did not have. Those were gifts bestowed on me by Mrs Roy” (115). Her exposure even as a 'fugitive' included privileged Christians who were revered for their English manners in post-Independence India such as Mrs Patmore, Miss Mitten, and Mrs Mathews; education

in schools run by Christian Missionaries; learning about Dionysus from her uncle; and meeting Laurie Baker first-hand, who inspired her architectural education. At times, Roy positions herself as an outsider and downplays certain privileges, creating a tension between vulnerability and advantage. Understandably, she lacked money at times but still possessed symbolic and cultural tools that allowed her to thrive far more than her mother did.

Throughout the memoir, the narrative is densely layered with political resonances that exemplify Hanisch's maxim that "the personal is political." Roy vividly critiques how national politics filter into her personal story: war, inequality, repression, corruption, and exile that at times makes one wonder if the book has anything to do with her mother, or if she is painting her motherland perhaps as 'gangster.' Roy's escapism—from her mother, home, and nation—is a recurring thread throughout her life. One is confronted with whether the escape is a survival, betrayal, or privilege. While Roy goes on to express 'leaving' home both as an act of rebellion and the condition that allows her to 'reclaim' her love for her mother, and perhaps for her nation, she is equally conflicted about her motherland.

This book, in many ways, provides a 'behind-the-scenes' glimpse into the author's perspectives on life, ideology, and sentiments—particularly appealing to readers familiar with her fiction. It offers significant clarity and background to much-discussed characters like Ammu and Velutha from *The God of Small Things*, or Anjum and Tilottama from *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, whom one cannot help but trace back to the author's life—or imagine as entirely fictional.

Overall, as a feminist memoir, the book adopts a highly subjective, lyrical style, at times risking self-indulgence. Roy's contradictions in love, politics, and privilege invite readers to oscillate between sympathy and critical distance. The intimate micro-climate of her

relationship with her mother is interwoven with broader social realities—dams, nuclear tests, and gang rape—events to which she is a perpetual witness, thus inviting the reader to both romanticise and question her solitude, an intentional tension in the memoir. What remains undisputed is Roy’s extraordinary storytelling — brilliant and engaging. She invests her heart and humour into the narrative, providing moments of unintentional comic relief even while recounting the brute forces shaping her life. Ultimately, the memoir succeeds in enriching readers’ understanding of Roy’s fiction and politics. It is highly recommended for anyone interested in creative writing, political autobiography, or gender studies. As Roy herself notes: “so read this book as you would a novel. It makes no larger claim. But then, there can be no larger claim” (7).

### Works Cited

Hanisch, Carol. “The Personal Is Political.” *Women’s Liberation*, 1969, [www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html](http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html). Accessed 20 Sept. 2025.

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