

Arundhati Roy's *Mother Mary Comes to Me*

Review by *Ramlal Agarwal*

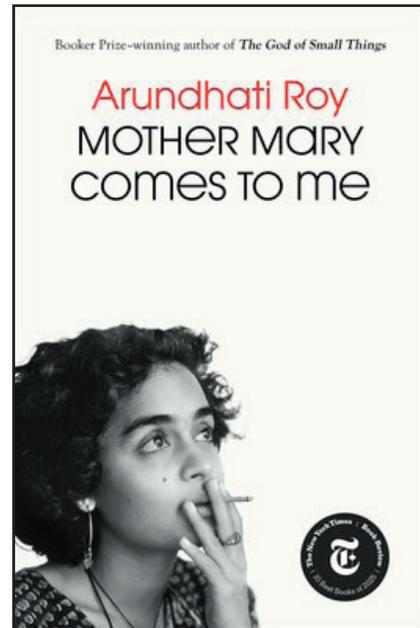
Unlike *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy's *Mother Mary Comes to Me* is not a controversial work. It is about the life of the novelist and her relationship with her mother, Mary. They are distinctly different from one another. The mother is very worldly, stern, unforgiving, and demanding, and the daughter is just her opposite, almost a hippie. There is a strong bond that holds them together and much discord that pulls them apart.

Mary belonged to a sprawling Syrian Christian family in Ayemenem. Her father was an imperial entomologist in government service, steeped in colonial culture and vanity. He would beat his wife and children, and he would kick them out of the house. Mary's mother was almost blind and spent her time playing the family violin. The ongoing conflicts in the family led Mary to leave and marry the first man who proposed to her, a Bengali named Micky Roy. She went to Assam with him, where he was an assistant manager of a tea estate.

She gave birth to a son, Lilit Kumar, and a daughter (Arundhati). When war broke out in 1962, women and children were evacuated from border states. As such, the family moved to Calcutta. Mary's husband could not take it, and he became an alcoholic. Mary became disheartened with him and decided to leave for the South with her children. They lodged at her father's abandoned house in Ooty, where she found a job as a schoolteacher. But before she could settle, her mother and older brother, Isaak, forced her to vacate the house, as Kerala did not grant women equal inheritance rights.

Mary was forced to move to Kottayam, where an English lady helped her become a teacher. She was a qualified teacher with a B.Ed., and while working as a teacher, an idea began to take root in her mind to start her own school. She succeeded in starting a school with just four students, two of whom were her own children.

The school was a makeshift arrangement on the premises of the Rotary Club. It attracted attention as it was operated by a Syrian Christian who was a qualified teacher with a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) degree. Mary was aware that sooner or later she would have to have an independent premise for the school, and she worked relentlessly to mobilise resources for a school with all modern amenities and purchased a few acres of land. In those days, an architect called Baker Larie was known for his innovative ideas in construction and design. She visited him with Arundhati at Trivandrum and began constructing the new school. Mary was asthmatic,



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and as the school began to grow in size and shape, so did her asthma.

Larrie had a third-year architecture student called Jesus working with him. Arundhati was drawn to him and wanted to be with him. She decided to enrol in the architecture school in Delhi after completing her matriculation. It was a time of sensual awakenings in Arundhati's life. She became aware of her awkward clothes. She became aware of her body and her impulses, and she decided to follow them, unmindful of what others thought of her.

The first friend she made was Golak. He was from Odisha. Within days of joining the school, Arundhati met Jesus, whom she calls J.C. He was wearing a funny-looking shirt, and Arundhati was wearing bell-bottoms, which she had designed herself. J.C. called Arundhati and asked her how her crazy mother was. Arundhati wondered how Mary could be called crazy, for she had grown up in a code of unquestioning obedience and adoration, which her school demanded. J.C. said, "Who in today's world goes around in a school being fanned by an attendant with a peacock feather fan?"

In Delhi, Arundhati began to drift away from Kottayam. In her first year, a granduncle, a retired engineer, visited her at the hostel. While stroking her back, he noticed that she was not wearing a bra. He asked her about the rules of the hostel, and Arundhati replied nonchalantly that there were no rules; likely, the students could come and go as and when they liked, and there was no warden. It shocked her uncle, and he left in a huff and shared his impression with others in Kottayam that the girl was in bad company. When Arundhati went to Kottayam on vacation, she was met with cold dislike and disgust from her mother. During her second-year vacation, she was not allowed to stay with Mary. Arundhati discusses Mary's affection for her students, followed by Mary's cold demeanour towards her. Mary was unyielding and unrelenting. She had not forgotten the slight her brother had subjected her to at Ooty. She filed a suit for equal rights for women in inheritance in the Supreme Court. She had stopped talking to people dependent on her. Instead, she wrote orders on chits of paper. One day, Arundhati received a chit asking her to lay the table for dinner, as Larrie would be dining with them. Arundhati was least interested in the intricacies of laying the table for dinner. But she somehow managed to do so. After dinner, Mary was furious about the clumsy way the table had been arranged and expressed her anger toward Arundhati. Arundhati listened to her words without responding, but, rumours aside, vowed never to revisit Kottayam. In Delhi, she began living with J.C., and to avoid rumours, they enlisted the help of their friend Carlo Buldrini to perform a marriage ceremony. Later, they moved to Goa, which is J.C.'s home state. Arundhati found it challenging to get along with J.C.'s dotting mother, so she decided to return to Delhi, where she reunited with Carlo and had an intimate relationship with him. She applied and got a job at the National Institute of Urban Affairs with a beautiful woman as her notional boss.

One day, the boss asked Arundhati to deliver some files to her home, where Arundhati met her husband, Pradip. Pradip was engaged in writing screenplays and producing small-budget films for Doordarshan. He hands her a screenplay and asks her to consider it. It was based on Joyce

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Cary's Master Johnson. Initially, Arundhati was not eager, but Carlo prevailed upon her to accept the offer. Pradip had been to Oxford and Balliol. Everybody held him in awe. Working with him was an experience for Arundhati, and she became a member of the crew. She was to stand silently without uttering a word. The shooting took place in Pachmarhi. However, Arundhati realised that she had missed her period. She informed Pradip, but he could not help her because he was unable to disturb the shooting. As such, Arundhati took a train and reached Delhi, where she knew a doctor. The doctor told her that there had to be someone to sign the form, or she would have to undergo an abortion without anaesthesia. Arundhati underwent an abortion without anaesthesia and returned to Pachmarhi. During the shooting, she applied for and won a scholarship to study the restoration of monuments and historical urban centres in Italy. She went to Italy after shooting her part, but soon left her studies and returned to Pachmarhi.

Pradip and Arundhati started working on documentaries sponsored by Doordarshan. Apart from writing screenplays for Pradip's documentaries, Arundhati also wrote a novel, celebrating a rebellion against age-old customs and traditions of proper behaviour and morality. The novel received the Booker Prize in 1997 and achieved significant popularity due to its unique style. It went on to sell millions of copies in dozens of languages and won its author a million in advance royalties. Mary, however, was indifferent to the windfall. She organised the book launch in Ayemenem and invited Kamala Das, a renowned Indo-English author recognised for her candid approach to sexuality. While Arundhati was giving her presentation, Mary kept talking with Kamala Das. Arundhati wrote, "She planned the launch and then wrecked it too. She presented me and, in the same breath, undermined me." Elsewhere, she wrote, "My mother was my shelter and storm."

The mother-daughter relationship is undoubtedly intricate and filled with emotional complexities, which Arundhati skilfully navigates. After her mother's death, she creates a beautifully designed grove in her memory.