

**The Art of Memoir Writing and Arundhati Roy's *Mother Mary Comes to Me***

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**1. Dr. Deepak Dhillon**

Assistant Professor of English, JVMGRR College, Charkhi Dadri, Haryana and

**2. Parvesh Dahiya**

Assistant Professor of English, Vaish Arya Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Bahadurgarh, Jhajjar,  
Haryana

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**Article Received:** 02/03/2026

**Article Accepted:** 05/04/2026

**Published Online:** 07/04/2026

**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.04.91

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**Abstract**

Memoir as a literary form negotiates the complex terrain between memory, subjectivity, and history. It is neither pure autobiography nor fiction but a hybrid narrative that reconstructs the self through selective remembrance, narrative shaping, and emotional truth. Arundhati Roy's *Mother Mary Comes to Me* (2025) exemplifies this art of memoir writing by blending personal recollection with socio-political critique, linguistic experimentation, and emotional introspection. This paper critically examines Roy's memoir as a literary text that expands the boundaries of memoir writing through its exploration of memory, mother-daughter relationships, trauma, language, and politics. It argues that Roy's memoir destabilizes conventional notions of truth and subjectivity, transforming personal narrative into a broader cultural and political discourse. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks of memoir studies and using textual evidence from the memoir along with secondary critiques, the paper demonstrates how Roy's work redefines memoir as an act of resistance, witnessing, and self-fashioning.

**Keywords:** Memoir, Memory, Subjectivity, Arundhati Roy, Motherhood.

**Introduction:**

Arundhati Roy's *Mother Mary Comes to Me* marks a significant intervention in contemporary memoir writing, not only because of its intimate engagement with personal history but also because of its sustained reflection on the nature of memory, language, and selfhood. Memoir as a genre has undergone profound transformation in recent decades, moving away from linear, fact-driven autobiography toward fragmented, reflexive, and self-conscious narrative forms. Roy's memoir participates in and extends this shift by

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foregrounding the instability of memory, the ethics of narration, and the entanglement of the personal with the political. In doing so, it exemplifies what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson describe as the “autobiographical act,” wherein life writing becomes a performative reconstruction rather than a transparent reflection of lived experience (Smith and Watson 1). Roy’s work, therefore, demands to be read not simply as a recollection of her relationship with her mother, Mary Roy, but as a complex literary artifact that interrogates the very possibility of representing truth through memory.

Memoir is considered a part of literature because it goes beyond mere factual recording and transforms personal experience into artistic, meaningful, and interpretive narrative. Although memoir is based on real life, it employs the same creative and aesthetic techniques that define literary writing—such as narrative structure, imagery, symbolism, characterization, and thematic depth. What distinguishes memoir from simple documentation is its crafted storytelling, where the writer selects, organizes, and shapes memories to produce emotional and intellectual impact.

One of the key reasons memoir belongs to literature is that it deals with subjective truth rather than objective fact. Unlike history or biography, which aim for factual accuracy, memoir explores how events are remembered and felt. Memory itself is selective and interpretive, and memoir writers consciously reconstruct their past to convey deeper emotional or psychological truths. As critics like Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson suggest, life writing is not a transparent reflection of reality but a “constructed narrative” shaped by perspective and context. This interpretive nature aligns memoir with literary art rather than with purely factual disciplines.

Memoir also qualifies as literature because it engages with universal themes such as identity, memory, family, trauma, love, loss, and belonging. While the experiences described are personal, they resonate with readers on a broader human level. A well-written memoir transcends the individual and speaks to shared emotions and social realities. For example, Arundhati Roy’s *Mother Mary Comes to Me* is not only about her relationship with her mother but also about larger issues of gender, language, politics, and selfhood. This ability to move from the personal to the universal is a defining feature of literary texts.

Another important aspect is the use of language and style. Memoir writers employ figurative language, imagery, and narrative voice to create aesthetic pleasure and emotional depth. The focus is not just on what is said, but how it is said. Roy’s lyrical and metaphor-rich prose, for instance, demonstrates that memoir can achieve the same artistic

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sophistication as fiction or poetry. The language itself becomes a tool for shaping meaning, which is a hallmark of literature.

Moreover, memoir involves narrative construction and characterization, similar to novels. The writer presents real people—including the self—as characters, develops conflicts, and structures the narrative in a way that maintains reader engagement. Events are arranged not simply in chronological order but in a way that highlights themes and emotional arcs. This narrative shaping is a creative process, reinforcing memoir's literary status.

Memoir is also considered literature because it often includes reflection and philosophical insight. Writers do not merely recount events; they interpret them, question them, and draw meaning from them. This reflective dimension transforms lived experience into intellectual and artistic inquiry. The memoir becomes a space for exploring questions of truth, memory, identity, and ethics—concerns central to literature.

Finally, memoir contributes to literature by offering diverse voices and perspectives, especially those that may be marginalized in mainstream historical or academic narratives. It allows individuals to tell their own stories, thereby enriching literary discourse with new forms of experience and expression. This democratizing aspect has made memoir a particularly important genre in contemporary literature. In conclusion, memoir is considered a part of literature because it combines personal experience with artistic expression, narrative craft, thematic depth, and reflective insight. It transforms life into art, making individual memory meaningful for a wider audience. By doing so, memoir occupies a vital place within the literary tradition, bridging the gap between reality and imagination, fact and interpretation, self and society.

Memoir as a literary genre has developed over centuries as a powerful mode of self-expression that blends personal experience with broader cultural, historical, and philosophical concerns. Unlike autobiography, which attempts a comprehensive life narrative, memoir is selective and thematic, focusing on particular phases, relationships, or experiences. Its literary significance lies in its ability to transform private memory into public discourse, making individual lives meaningful within larger social and historical frameworks.

The roots of memoir in English literary tradition can be traced back to early confessional writings such as *Confessions* by Saint Augustine. Although written in Latin, its influence on English life-writing is immense, particularly in establishing introspection and self-analysis as central to narrative. Augustine's exploration of sin, memory, and divine grace

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set a precedent for later memoirs that emphasize interiority and moral reflection. In the early modern period, works like *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* by Samuel Pepys introduced a more secular and observational mode of memoir. Pepys' diary is remarkable for its vivid documentation of everyday life and major historical events such as the plague and the Great Fire of London, thus blending personal narrative with social history.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed the emergence of memoir as a distinctly literary form. *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* by Thomas De Quincey is a pioneering text that combines autobiography with psychological exploration, particularly the effects of addiction and the workings of the human mind. This work marks a shift from external events to internal experience, anticipating the modernist focus on consciousness. Similarly, Romantic and Victorian writers contributed to life-writing through essays, journals, and reminiscences that foregrounded individuality and artistic sensibility.

In the twentieth century, memoir became a major literary genre, particularly in response to the upheavals of war and social change. *Goodbye to All That* by Robert Graves offers a disillusioned account of World War I, highlighting the psychological trauma and loss experienced by soldiers. This work exemplifies how memoir can serve as a critique of dominant narratives of heroism and nationalism. Similarly, *Speak, Memory* by Vladimir Nabokov is celebrated for its lyrical prose and intricate reconstruction of childhood and exile. Nabokov's emphasis on memory as an aesthetic and imaginative act underscores the literary sophistication of memoir.

Holocaust memoirs represent another significant development in the genre, transforming personal testimony into ethical and historical documentation. *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank and *Night* by Elie Wiesel are among the most widely read works in this category. These texts demonstrate how memoir can function as a form of witnessing, preserving the memory of collective trauma while foregrounding individual experience. They also raise important questions about representation, memory, and the ethics of narration.

In the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, memoir expanded to include diverse voices and experimental forms. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou is a landmark work that explores race, gender, and identity in the African American experience. Angelou's use of lyrical language and episodic structure exemplifies the artistic possibilities of memoir. Similarly, *The Liars' Club* by Mary Karr revitalized the genre with its candid portrayal of family dysfunction and childhood trauma, influencing a new wave of confessional memoir writing.

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Contemporary memoirs continue to explore themes of identity, illness, and self-transformation. *When Breath Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi reflects on mortality and the meaning of life, while *Educated* by Tara Westover examines the transformative power of education and the complexities of family relationships. These works highlight the continued relevance of memoir as a means of exploring personal and social issues.

Indian Writing in English has made significant contributions to the memoir tradition, particularly in its engagement with colonial history, nationalism, identity, and social change. One of the most influential works is *My Experiments with Truth* by Mahatma Gandhi. Although often classified as an autobiography, it functions as a memoir of ethical and spiritual experimentation, focusing on Gandhi's pursuit of truth (satya) and non-violence (ahimsa). The text exemplifies how memoir can serve as a vehicle for moral reflection and political philosophy.

Another important work is *Freedom at Midnight* by Dominique Lapierre and Larry Collins, which, while not strictly a memoir, incorporates personal narratives and testimonies to depict the Partition of India. More directly autobiographical is *Dreamers* by Snigdha Poonam, which captures the aspirations and anxieties of India's youth in a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape.

In contemporary Indian memoir writing, *The Difficulty of Being Good* by Gurcharan Das blends personal reflection with philosophical inquiry, exploring the concept of dharma through both lived experience and classical texts. Similarly, *Ants Among Elephants* by Sujatha Gidla offers a powerful account of caste oppression, combining memoir with social history. This work demonstrates how memoir can function as a form of political resistance and social critique.

Arundhati Roy's *Mother Mary Comes to Me* represents a significant contribution to this tradition. The memoir blends personal narrative with political commentary, exploring themes of motherhood, identity, language, and resistance. Roy's fragmented structure, lyrical prose, and self-reflexive approach exemplify the evolution of memoir as a literary form that challenges conventional boundaries between fiction and non-fiction.

In conclusion, the development of memoir in English literature reflects a gradual shift from spiritual confession and historical documentation to complex explorations of identity, memory, and social reality. From Augustine and Pepys to Angelou, Westover, and contemporary Indian writers, memoir has evolved into a versatile and dynamic genre. Its enduring appeal lies in its ability to transform individual experience into a meaningful

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narrative that resonates with broader human concerns. In both Western and Indian contexts, memoir continues to serve as a powerful medium for self-expression, cultural critique, and literary innovation.

Memoir differs fundamentally from autobiography in its selective and interpretive nature. Philippe Lejeune's formulation of the "autobiographical pact" posits that autobiography rests on an implicit agreement between author and reader that the narrative will be truthful and that the author, narrator, and protagonist are identical (Lejeune 14). However, memoir complicates this pact by acknowledging that memory is inherently unreliable and shaped by imagination. Roy explicitly gestures toward this instability when she observes that human beings are "a living, breathing soup of memory and imagination" (Roy). This assertion destabilizes the expectation of factual accuracy and instead foregrounds the constructedness of narrative. In Roy's memoir, the truth is not located in empirical detail but in emotional resonance. The narrative thus aligns with postmodern life writing practices that privilege subjective truth over objective verification.

The structure of *Mother Mary Comes to Me* reflects this understanding of memory as fragmented and nonlinear. Rather than presenting a chronological account of her life, Roy constructs her memoir through episodic recollections, associative leaps, and recursive patterns. The narrative moves fluidly between past and present, often returning to the same events from different perspectives. This fragmentation mirrors what trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth identify as the belated and disjointed nature of traumatic memory, which resists linear narration (Caruth 4). Roy's recollections of childhood, particularly those involving her mother, are marked by emotional intensity and discontinuity, suggesting that memory is shaped as much by affect as by chronology. The circular structure of the memoir, which begins and ends with the death of Mary Roy, further reinforces the idea that memory is anchored in loss. Mourning becomes the lens through which the past is reconstructed, and the act of writing itself becomes a form of grieving.

At the center of the memoir lies the complex and often ambivalent relationship between Roy and her mother. Mary Roy emerges as a powerful yet contradictory figure, embodying both nurturing care and oppressive authority. Roy describes her as "my shelter and my storm," a formulation that encapsulates the duality of maternal influence (Roy). This ambivalence challenges idealized representations of motherhood and instead presents it as a site of conflict, negotiation, and emotional turbulence. Feminist scholars have long emphasized the importance of examining mother-daughter relationships in life writing, noting that such narratives often reveal the interplay between personal identity and patriarchal structures (Gilmore 63). In Roy's memoir, the relationship with her mother is

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inseparable from broader questions of gender, power, and autonomy. Mary Roy's role as an educator and activist positions her as a figure of resistance against patriarchal norms, yet her personal interactions with her daughter reveal the complexities of such resistance within the domestic sphere.

Roy's admission that she "left my mother not because I didn't love her... Staying would have made that impossible" underscores the paradoxical nature of their relationship (Roy 17). Love, in this context, necessitates distance, and separation becomes a means of preserving emotional connection. This tension between attachment and autonomy is a recurring theme in memoir writing, where the act of narrating familial relationships often involves both acknowledgment and critique. As Smith and Watson argue, life writing is always "relational," shaped by the subject's interactions with others and the cultural frameworks within which those interactions occur (Smith and Watson 10). Roy's portrayal of her mother thus reflects not only a personal history but also a broader exploration of how identity is formed through relational dynamics.

The memoir's engagement with trauma further complicates its narrative structure and thematic concerns. Roy's recollections of childhood are marked by moments of fear, instability, and emotional conflict, suggesting the presence of intergenerational trauma. Trauma, as Caruth notes, is characterized by its resistance to direct representation; it manifests through repetition, fragmentation, and gaps in narrative (Caruth 5). Roy's episodic storytelling, with its emphasis on sensory detail and emotional intensity, reflects this dynamic. The memoir does not attempt to provide a coherent or complete account of trauma but instead captures its lingering effects on memory and identity. This emphasis on emotional truth rather than factual completeness aligns with contemporary understandings of memoir as a form of therapeutic self-expression.

Language plays a crucial role in Roy's memoir, both as a medium of expression and as a subject of reflection. Roy's prose is characterized by its lyrical intensity, metaphorical richness, and linguistic experimentation. She describes her search for language as a process of discovery, likening it to hunting down "a live language-animal" (Roy 43). This metaphor highlights the dynamic and elusive nature of language, which resists fixed meaning and demands creative engagement. Roy's insistence on using "language that I used, not language that used me" underscores her commitment to linguistic autonomy and authenticity (Roy 23). This emphasis on language as a site of agency aligns with postcolonial theories of writing, which view language as both a tool of domination and a means of resistance (Ashcroft et al. 37).

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The memoir's multilingual context further complicates its linguistic landscape. Roy's engagement with multiple languages reflects the cultural and social diversity of her upbringing, as well as the broader postcolonial condition. Language, in this sense, becomes a marker of identity and a means of negotiating between different cultural frameworks. The interplay between English and other languages in the memoir highlights the tensions between colonial legacy and local expression, a theme that has been extensively explored in postcolonial literature. Roy's linguistic experimentation thus serves not only as a stylistic device but also as a political statement.

One of the most distinctive features of Roy's memoir is its integration of personal narrative with political commentary. Roy's identity as a writer and activist is inseparable from her engagement with socio-political issues, and this engagement permeates the memoir. She acknowledges that "it was politics—and anger—that held me together," suggesting that her personal experiences are deeply intertwined with her political consciousness (Roy). This intersection of the personal and the political reflects feminist theories of life writing, which emphasize that personal narratives are shaped by broader social and historical contexts (Smith and Watson 16). Roy's memoir thus transcends the boundaries of individual experience, positioning itself as a critique of systemic inequalities and injustices.

The inclusion of political commentary within a memoir raises important questions about genre and narrative coherence. Some critics have argued that Roy's shifts between personal and political themes create a sense of fragmentation or imbalance. However, this fragmentation can also be interpreted as a deliberate strategy that reflects the interconnectedness of personal and political realities. As Leigh Gilmore notes, memoir often resists linear coherence in order to capture the complexity of lived experience (Gilmore 78). Roy's narrative, with its shifts in tone and focus, embodies this resistance, challenging readers to engage with the multiplicity of perspectives and experiences that shape her identity.

Self-reflexivity is another key aspect of Roy's memoir, as she continually interrogates the act of writing itself. She acknowledges the ethical dilemmas inherent in memoir writing, particularly the potential for betrayal when narrating personal experiences. Her reflection that writing the memoir may constitute "a betrayal of my younger self" highlights the tension between memory and representation (Roy 54). This self-awareness enhances the authenticity of the narrative by foregrounding the constructedness of memoir. As Paul John Eakin argues, life writing involves a process of "self-invention," wherein the author actively shapes their identity through narrative (Eakin 5). Roy's memoir exemplifies

this process, presenting identity as a dynamic and evolving construct rather than a fixed essence.

The question of identity is central to the memoir, as Roy traces her journey from childhood to adulthood. Her identity is shaped by a complex interplay of familial influence, cultural context, and personal experience. Mary Roy's role as a strong and independent woman has a profound impact on Roy's development, instilling in her a sense of resilience and intellectual curiosity. At the same time, Roy's identity is defined by her resistance to authority and her engagement with political issues. The memoir thus presents identity as a process of becoming, shaped by both internal and external forces.

Roy's work also engages with broader theoretical debates about the nature of memory and selfhood. Scholars such as Maurice Halbwachs have argued that memory is a social construct, shaped by collective frameworks and cultural contexts (Halbwachs 38). Roy's memoir reflects this understanding by situating her personal memories within broader historical and social narratives. Her recollections of childhood are intertwined with reflections on political events, cultural norms, and social structures, suggesting that individual memory is inseparable from collective history.

The aesthetic innovation of Roy's memoir lies in its refusal to conform to traditional genre conventions. By blending elements of fiction, autobiography, and political essay, Roy expands the boundaries of memoir writing. This hybridity reflects what Homi K. Bhabha describes as the "in-between" space of cultural production, where identities and narratives are negotiated and redefined (Bhabha 2). Roy's memoir occupies this liminal space, challenging readers to reconsider their assumptions about genre and representation.

At the same time, Roy's work raises important questions about the ethics of representation. The act of writing about real people and events involves a degree of interpretation and selection that can never fully capture the complexity of lived experience. Roy's acknowledgment of this limitation reflects a broader ethical concern within memoir studies, where the tension between truth and representation is a central issue. Her openness about the constructed nature of her narrative invites readers to engage critically with the text, recognizing that it is both a personal account and a literary creation.

In conclusion, *Mother Mary Comes to Me* exemplifies the art of memoir writing through its exploration of memory, language, identity, and politics. Roy's narrative challenges conventional notions of truth and subjectivity, presenting memoir as a hybrid form that combines personal reflection with broader cultural and political critique. Through

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its fragmented structure, lyrical language, and thematic complexity, the memoir offers a nuanced understanding of the relationship between memory and identity. Roy's work demonstrates that memoir is not merely a record of past events but a dynamic process of self-construction and interpretation. By foregrounding the interplay between personal experience and collective history, she redefines memoir as a form of resistance, witnessing, and creative expression.

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