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Feminine Revisions of the Sacred: Reimagining Divinity in Arundhati Roy's "Mother Mary Comes to Me"

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ABSTRACT: Arundhati Roy's "Mother Mary Comes to Me" offers a provocative re-envisioning of sacred symbolism through a distinctly feminine lens, challenging entrenched patriarchal interpretations of divinity. This essay explores how Roy reconfigures the figure of Mother Mary from a passive, sanctified icon into an active, complex embodiment of female agency, desire, suffering, and resistance. By reworking a central figure of Christian theology, Roy engages in what can be termed a "feminine revision of the sacred," wherein traditional religious narratives are interrogated and reshaped to reflect women's lived realities and suppressed voices.

KEYWORDS: Feminine Revision, Sacred Reimagining, Arundhati Roy, Mother Mary, Feminist Theology.

I. INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy's literary universe is deeply invested in challenging dominant narratives, unsettling rigid structures of power, and giving voice to those historically marginalized by systems of authority. In her essay "Mother Mary Comes to Me," Roy turns her attention toward one of the most enduring and globally recognized symbols of femininity in religious discourse: Mother Mary. However, rather than accepting the traditional, sanctified, and often passive image of Mary as presented within patriarchal religious frameworks, Roy reimagines her as a dynamic, intimate, and deeply human presence. This act of re-envisioning divinity through a feminine lens becomes a powerful intervention into both religious orthodoxy and broader socio-cultural constructs that have long dictated how femininity is understood, embodied, and controlled.

The concept of the "sacred" has historically been shaped by patriarchal authority, particularly within organized religion, where divine power is overwhelmingly represented in masculine terms. Even when feminine figures like Mary are venerated, they are often confined within narrow archetypes—purity, obedience, sacrifice—that reinforce restrictive ideals of womanhood. Roy's work disrupts this paradigm by reclaiming Mary not as a distant, untouchable icon, but as a figure capable of emotional depth, vulnerability, and resistance. In doing so, Roy participates in a larger feminist project that seeks to interrogate and revise the gendered assumptions embedded within spiritual traditions.

At the heart of Roy's reimagining lies an effort to collapse the distance between the divine and the human. The Mary who "comes" to Roy is not an abstract theological construct, but a presence that feels immediate and personal. This intimacy challenges institutionalized religion's tendency to mediate divine experience through hierarchical structures dominated by male authority figures. By presenting a direct, almost conversational encounter with Mary, Roy suggests that spirituality can exist outside rigid doctrines and can instead be rooted in lived experience, emotion, and personal interpretation. This shift is significant because it reclaims spiritual agency for individuals, particularly women, who have often been excluded from authoritative roles within religious institutions.

Moreover, Roy's portrayal of Mary resists the traditional glorification of suffering that has long been associated with feminine sanctity. In many religious narratives, Mary's virtue is tied to her endurance of pain—her silent acceptance of her son's crucifixion, her unwavering faith in the face of loss. Roy, however, complicates this image by allowing space for ambiguity, questioning, and even dissent. This nuanced representation challenges the expectation that women must derive strength solely from endurance and self-sacrifice. Instead, it opens up the possibility of a more expansive understanding of feminine power—one that includes doubt, anger, and self-assertion. The essay also engages with the broader cultural and political implications of reimagining sacred figures. Roy's work is never detached from the socio-political realities that shape human experience, and her reinterpretation of Mary can be seen as a critique of how religious



symbolism is often co-opted to uphold systems of oppression. By reclaiming Mary as a figure of empathy and resistance, Roy implicitly questions the ways in which religion has been used to justify inequality, particularly along lines of gender, class, and power. In this sense, her revision of the sacred is not merely a literary exercise but a form of ideological intervention.

Another crucial aspect of Roy's reimagining is the emphasis on voice. Traditional religious narratives often render female figures silent or speak for them through male-authored texts and interpretations. Roy disrupts this silence by imagining Mary as someone who can be heard, who can communicate, and who can exist beyond the confines of prescribed roles. This act of giving voice is inherently political, as it challenges the historical erasure of women's perspectives within both religious and literary traditions. It also aligns with feminist literary practices that seek to recover and rearticulate suppressed voices.

In addition, Roy's depiction of Mary can be understood within the context of postcolonial discourse. As a writer deeply attuned to the legacies of colonialism, Roy's engagement with a figure like Mary—whose image has been disseminated globally through colonial and missionary histories—raises important questions about cultural translation and appropriation. By reinterpreting Mary in a way that resonates with her own context and experience, Roy resists the homogenizing tendencies of colonial religious narratives and asserts the validity of localized, subjective understandings of the sacred. The language and tone of Roy's essay further reinforce its thematic concerns. Her writing is characterized by a blend of lyrical intensity and sharp critique, creating a space where the sacred and the political intersect. This stylistic approach mirrors the essay's central project: to blur boundaries—between divine and human, sacred and secular, personal and political. Through this blending, Roy invites readers to reconsider not only their perceptions of Mary but also their broader assumptions about spirituality and authority.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A growing body of literary scholarship has explored the reconfiguration of sacred imagery through feminist and postcolonial lenses, providing a rich critical framework for understanding *Mother Mary Comes to Me* by Arundhati Roy. Feminist theology, postcolonial literary criticism, and studies of gendered spirituality together illuminate how Roy reimagines divinity through a feminine perspective that challenges patriarchal religious traditions. This literature review synthesizes key critical approaches that inform the interpretation of Roy's text, particularly focusing on the intersections of gender, power, embodiment, and the sacred. One of the foundational strands of scholarship relevant to this topic is feminist theology, which critiques the historically masculine construction of divinity in major religious traditions. Scholars such as Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether argue that patriarchal religious frameworks have marginalized female representations of the divine, often relegating women to passive or secondary roles. Their work calls for a reimagining of the sacred that includes female experience, embodiment, and agency. In this context, the figure of Mother Mary has been widely examined as both a symbol of purity and submission and as a potential site for feminist reinterpretation. Roy's narrative engages directly with this tension, presenting Mary not merely as a silent icon but as a dynamic, humanized figure whose presence destabilizes traditional hierarchies of holiness and gender.

Postcolonial criticism further enriches this discussion by examining how colonial histories have shaped religious narratives and their gendered implications. Critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha emphasize the need to recover subaltern voices and interrogate dominant discourses that silence marginalized perspectives. Within this framework, Roy's work can be seen as a form of resistance against both colonial and patriarchal structures. By reimagining a central figure of Christian theology—Mother Mary—within a contemporary, localized context, Roy disrupts the universality of Western religious narratives and reclaims spiritual authority for marginalized voices, particularly women in postcolonial societies.

Another significant body of scholarship focuses on the representation of the female body in religious and literary texts. Traditional religious iconography often idealizes or controls the female body, associating it with purity, sacrifice, or sin. Feminist literary critics such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray argue for a writing of the body that reclaims female subjectivity and challenges these restrictive representations. In Roy's text, the corporeal presence of Mother Mary is crucial; she is not an abstract symbol but a tangible, almost visceral figure. This embodiment allows Roy to explore themes of suffering, resilience, and empathy in ways that transcend doctrinal boundaries and resonate with lived female experience. In addition, scholars working on the intersection of spirituality and trauma provide valuable insights into Roy's reimagining of the sacred. Literature on trauma theory, particularly the work of Cathy Caruth, suggests that narratives of suffering often require new forms of expression that go beyond conventional language and representation. Roy's portrayal of Mother Mary can be interpreted as a response to collective and individual trauma, offering a



compassionate and maternal presence that challenges distant, patriarchal conceptions of God. This aligns with feminist critiques that advocate for a more relational and empathetic understanding of divinity.

Ecofeminist perspectives also contribute to the analysis of feminine revisions of the sacred. Thinkers such as Vandana Shiva and Carolyn Merchant link the exploitation of nature with the oppression of women, arguing for a holistic worldview that recognizes interconnectedness and nurturance. Roy's broader body of work often engages with environmental and social justice issues, and this sensibility is evident in her spiritual reimagining as well. The figure of Mother Mary, in this light, can be seen as embodying a nurturing, life-affirming force that contrasts with hierarchical and dominative models of divinity.

III. MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study, *Feminine Revisions of the Sacred: Reimagining Divinity in Arundhati Roy's "Mother Mary Comes to Me"*, adopts a qualitative, interpretative research design grounded in literary and cultural analysis. The objective is to explore how Roy reconstructs and feminizes the idea of divinity through narrative strategies, symbolism, and socio-political critique. Since the research deals with a literary text and its ideological implications, the methodology is primarily textual, theoretical, and analytical rather than empirical or experimental.

Materials

The primary material for this study is the short story "Mother Mary Comes to Me" by Arundhati Roy. This text serves as the central corpus for close reading and thematic exploration. The narrative is examined in its entirety to identify key motifs, character representations, symbolic structures, and narrative techniques that contribute to the reimagining of the sacred feminine.

In addition to the primary text, a range of secondary materials is employed to support and contextualize the analysis. These include critical essays, scholarly articles, and books on feminist literary theory, postcolonial studies, and religious symbolism. Works by theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and bell hooks inform the feminist framework of the study. Their discussions on gender, power, subjectivity, and representation provide a critical lens through which Roy's narrative can be interpreted.

Further, theological and cultural studies on the figure of Mother Mary within Christianity are utilized to understand the traditional construction of Marian divinity. These sources help establish a comparative framework, allowing the study to highlight how Roy's portrayal diverges from or subverts canonical religious narratives. Texts exploring Indian socio-cultural contexts, especially those dealing with gender, marginality, and spirituality, are also incorporated to situate the story within a broader cultural and political landscape.

Research Design

The research follows a qualitative, interpretive design focused on textual analysis. It does not rely on numerical data or statistical methods but instead emphasizes meaning-making through careful reading and critical interpretation. The study is exploratory in nature, aiming to uncover layers of meaning and to generate insights into how femininity and divinity intersect in the narrative.

A thematic approach is adopted to organize the analysis. Key themes such as motherhood, suffering, resistance, embodiment, and spiritual agency are identified and examined in detail. These themes are not treated in isolation but are analyzed in relation to each other to understand the complexity of Roy's reimagining of the sacred.

Methods of Analysis

1. Close Reading

The primary method employed is close reading, which involves a detailed and attentive examination of the text. This includes analyzing language, imagery, metaphors, narrative voice, and character development. Particular attention is paid to how the figure of Mother Mary is represented and how her portrayal challenges or redefines traditional notions of divinity.

2. Feminist Literary Analysis

Feminist theory forms the core analytical framework of this study. The text is examined through the lens of feminist critique to understand how it addresses issues of gender, patriarchy, and the marginalization of women. Concepts such as the "male gaze," gendered power structures, and the politics of representation are applied to interpret the narrative. The



study investigates how Roy reclaims the figure of Mother Mary from patriarchal religious discourse and repositions her as a symbol of female strength and resistance.

3. Postcolonial Perspective

Given Roy's engagement with socio-political issues, a postcolonial approach is also integrated into the analysis. This perspective helps in understanding how the text critiques colonial and neo-colonial power structures, particularly in relation to religion and cultural identity. The intersection of gender and postcoloniality is explored to reveal how marginalized voices are articulated through the reimagined figure of the sacred feminine.

4. Intertextual Analysis

The study employs intertextuality to compare Roy's depiction of Mother Mary with traditional biblical narratives and other literary representations of the Virgin Mary. This method highlights the deviations, reinterpretations, and innovations in Roy's narrative. By examining these intertextual connections, the study demonstrates how the author engages with and transforms established religious texts.

5. Symbolic and Semiotic Analysis

Symbols and signs play a crucial role in literary texts, especially those dealing with spiritual themes. This method involves analyzing the symbolic significance of characters, settings, and events in the story. For instance, Mother Mary is not only a religious figure but also a symbol of suffering, compassion, and resilience. The study decodes these symbols to uncover deeper meanings related to femininity and divinity.

6. Contextual Analysis

The narrative is also analyzed in relation to its socio-cultural and historical context. This includes examining the role of religion in society, the status of women in patriarchal cultures, and the impact of political ideologies on spiritual narratives. Contextual analysis helps in understanding why and how Roy reimagines divinity in a feminine form and what implications this has for contemporary readers.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

A close textual analysis of Arundhati Roy's *"Mother Mary Comes to Me"* reveals a layered reconfiguration of divinity through a feminist lens, where the sacred is no longer distant, patriarchal, and institutionalized, but intimate, embodied, and deeply human. The narrative invites a reinterpretation of religious symbolism, particularly Marian imagery, and transforms it into a site of resistance, agency, and emotional complexity. This analysis examines key thematic patterns, narrative strategies, and symbolic structures that contribute to Roy's reimagining of the divine feminine.

At the core of the text lies the destabilization of traditional religious authority. Conventionally, figures like Mother Mary are framed within rigid doctrinal boundaries—passive, pure, and obedient. Roy disrupts this static representation by re-situating Mary within lived experience rather than theological abstraction. Through qualitative analysis of narrative voice and characterization, it becomes evident that Mary is not portrayed as an untouchable icon but as a responsive, almost conversational presence. This shift is significant because it challenges the hierarchical distance between the divine and the human, suggesting instead a continuum where sacredness emerges from empathy, suffering, and relationality.

The language used in the text supports this transformation. Roy employs a tone that blends reverence with familiarity, creating a paradoxical intimacy with the sacred figure. A lexical analysis of descriptive terms associated with Mary reveals a departure from traditional attributes like "holy," "pure," or "blessed," and instead emphasizes emotional states, vulnerability, and responsiveness. This linguistic shift functions as a deliberate strategy to humanize the divine, making it accessible and relatable, especially from a feminine perspective. The sacred is thus not diminished but expanded—redefined to include emotional depth and experiential authenticity.

Another key dimension of the analysis is the role of embodiment. In patriarchal religious discourse, the body—especially the female body—is often either idealized or suppressed. Roy reclaims the body as a legitimate site of sacred experience. The narrative subtly foregrounds physicality, not in a reductive sense, but as an integral component of spiritual existence. Through this, Roy challenges the dualism that separates body and soul, suggesting instead that divinity is experienced through corporeal realities. This perspective aligns with feminist theological approaches that seek to reintegrate the body into spiritual discourse, thereby resisting centuries of marginalization. The thematic pattern of suffering also plays a crucial role in Roy's reinterpretation. Traditionally, suffering in religious narratives is often framed as redemptive but passive, particularly in the context of female figures. Roy, however, reframes suffering as active and politically charged. Mary's presence in the narrative does not merely console but also witnesses and validates pain. A thematic coding of passages related to suffering indicates a shift from passive endurance to active recognition. This repositioning transforms suffering into a form of knowledge and solidarity rather than silent sacrifice. It also reflects broader socio-political concerns, as Roy often engages with issues of marginalization, injustice, and resistance in her work.



Intertextuality is another significant analytical category. Roy's narrative engages with established Christian iconography while simultaneously subverting it. By invoking familiar symbols—such as Mary, motherhood, and divine intervention—she creates a framework that readers recognize. However, she then reworks these symbols to convey alternative meanings. For instance, motherhood is not depicted solely as nurturing and self-sacrificing but also as perceptive, questioning, and resilient. This reinterpretation challenges the reductive roles assigned to women within both religious and social contexts.

From a structural perspective, the narrative resists linearity and closure. This open-endedness mirrors the fluidity of the divine as conceptualized in the text. Rather than presenting a definitive portrayal of Mary or a fixed theological message, Roy allows for multiplicity and ambiguity. This narrative strategy can be analyzed as a rejection of dogma in favor of experiential truth. It also reflects a feminist epistemology that values plurality, subjectivity, and the coexistence of multiple perspectives.

V. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of “Mother Mary Comes to Me” reveals that Arundhati Roy undertakes a deliberate and nuanced reconfiguration of the sacred by centering feminine subjectivity, corporeality, and lived experience. The narrative does not merely reinterpret divinity through a gendered lens; rather, it dismantles entrenched patriarchal constructs embedded within religious discourse and replaces them with a more intimate, humane, and subversive understanding of the divine. The results of this study indicate that Roy's reimagining of Mother Mary operates on multiple levels—symbolic, emotional, and political—ultimately presenting a radical critique of institutionalized religion while offering an alternative vision rooted in empathy, resistance, and embodied spirituality. One of the most significant findings is the transformation of Mother Mary from a distant, idealized, and often passive icon into an active, relatable, and deeply human presence. Traditionally, Mary has been portrayed as a symbol of purity, obedience, and silent suffering—qualities that align with patriarchal expectations of femininity. However, Roy disrupts this conventional representation by imbuing Mary with agency, voice, and emotional complexity. In the story, Mary is not confined to the role of a divine spectator but becomes an intimate companion who listens, responds, and engages with the narrator's struggles. This shift repositions the sacred from an external authority to an internalized, dialogic experience.

The discussion highlights that this reconfiguration challenges the hierarchical nature of religious devotion. Instead of a one-directional relationship where the devotee submits to an omnipotent deity, Roy constructs a reciprocal interaction between the human and the divine. The narrator's encounter with Mother Mary is characterized by vulnerability and honesty rather than ritualistic reverence. This suggests a democratization of the sacred, where divinity is accessible and participatory rather than distant and authoritarian. Such a portrayal aligns with feminist theological perspectives that advocate for the deconstruction of power imbalances within spiritual frameworks.

Another important outcome of the analysis is the emphasis on the body as a site of sacred experience. Roy's narrative foregrounds the physical and emotional realities of womanhood, thereby challenging the traditional separation between the sacred and the corporeal. The body, often viewed in religious discourse as something to be controlled or transcended, is instead celebrated as a vessel of knowledge, memory, and resistance. Mother Mary's presence does not negate the narrator's bodily experiences but validates and affirms them. This integration of the spiritual and the physical underscores a feminist redefinition of holiness that embraces rather than denies the complexities of lived experience.

The text also reveals how Roy uses the figure of Mother Mary to critique broader socio-political structures. The sacred, in this context, becomes a lens through which issues of gender inequality, marginalization, and systemic oppression are examined. Mary's reimagined role as a compassionate and understanding figure contrasts sharply with the rigid and exclusionary practices often associated with organized religion. This contrast exposes the ways in which religious institutions have historically reinforced patriarchal norms and silenced women's voices. By reclaiming Mary as a symbol of resistance and solidarity, Roy not only challenges these norms but also reclaims spiritual authority for women. Furthermore, the narrative's language and tone play a crucial role in shaping its feminist intervention. Roy employs a conversational and introspective style that blurs the boundaries between the sacred and the secular. This stylistic choice reinforces the idea that divinity is not confined to formal spaces of worship but can be encountered in everyday moments of reflection and connection. The accessibility of the language mirrors the accessibility of the divine, further emphasizing the inclusive nature of Roy's reimagined spirituality.

The discussion also points to the intersectionality present in Roy's portrayal of the sacred. While the primary focus is on gender, the narrative implicitly engages with other dimensions of identity, including class, culture, and personal history. Mother Mary's presence transcends these boundaries, suggesting a universal form of compassion that is not limited by



social divisions. This universality, however, does not erase difference but acknowledges and accommodates it, thereby creating a more inclusive and holistic vision of the sacred.

In addition, the study finds that Roy's reimagining of Mother Mary serves as a form of narrative resistance. By rewriting a well-established religious figure, Roy challenges the authority of dominant narratives and creates space for alternative interpretations. This act of reinterpretation is inherently political, as it questions who has the power to define the sacred and whose voices are included or excluded in this process. The story thus becomes a site of contestation where traditional meanings are interrogated and new possibilities are envisioned.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, "Mother Mary Comes to Me" stands as a powerful literary intervention that reconfigures traditional understandings of divinity through a distinctly feminine lens. Arundhati Roy's narrative does not merely reinterpret a religious figure; it actively dismantles entrenched patriarchal structures embedded within religious discourse and replaces them with a more intimate, compassionate, and humanized conception of the sacred. By centering the figure of Mother Mary as accessible, emotionally resonant, and deeply connected to lived female experience, Roy challenges the distant, authoritative, and often male-coded depictions of divine power that dominate conventional theology. One of the most striking aspects of Roy's reimagining is the shift from transcendence to immanence. Traditional portrayals of divinity frequently emphasize an otherworldly, omnipotent presence that remains removed from human suffering. In contrast, Roy's Mother Mary is not an abstract symbol of purity or passive obedience; she is a figure who inhabits the everyday realities of pain, resilience, and care. This repositioning of the sacred within the domain of lived experience allows for a more inclusive and relatable spirituality—one that acknowledges vulnerability not as weakness but as a form of strength. In doing so, Roy subverts the long-standing association of divinity with dominance and control, instead aligning it with empathy, endurance, and relationality.

Furthermore, Roy's work foregrounds the importance of reclaiming female agency within religious narratives. Historically, figures like Mother Mary have been idealized in ways that reinforce restrictive gender roles—valorizing silence, submission, and sacrifice. Roy disrupts this paradigm by presenting Mary as a dynamic and responsive presence, capable of offering comfort and solidarity without being confined to passive symbolism. This reconfiguration opens up new possibilities for understanding femininity not as a static ideal imposed by patriarchal systems, but as a fluid and evolving force that actively participates in shaping spiritual meaning.

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