

Literariness Journal

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly
Journal of Literature and Cultural
Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614
E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

Vol. 1, Issue. 2
March 2026

© 2026 by the author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Citation: Jacob, Nimmy Mariam, and Neethu Tessa Baby. "Legacies of Resilience: Vulnerability and Resistance in Arundhati Roy's Memoir *Mother Mary Comes to Me*." *Literariness Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2, Mar. 2026, pp. 843–850.



A Literariness.org Project

Legacies of Resilience: Vulnerability and Resistance in Arundhati Roy's Memoir *Mother Mary Comes to Me*

NIMMY MARIAM JACOB

Research Scholar (Full Time)
Department of English
St. Berchman's College, Changanassery,
Affiliated to Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala

DR. NEETHU TESSA BABY

Assistant Professor and Research Guide
Department of English
Assumption College, Changanassery
Affiliated to Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala

Abstract: Human beings are inextricably dependent on their surroundings and sustained within natural and manufactured ecosystems shaped by social relationships and interdependence. The fates of individuals and communities are woven together, exposing everyone to a shared vulnerability conceptualised as precariousness. Alongside naturally induced vulnerabilities, social hierarchies assign differential value to lives, producing vulnerabilities engineered by social and political forces. These are directed toward specific communities through class, caste, gender, and economic insecurity, resulting in purposefully curated inequality known as precarity. Judith Butler observes that gendered bodies experience precarity differently, where some lives are protected while others are ignored. Vulnerabilities are often associated with susceptibility, victimisation, and passivity, leading to legislative and infrastructural measures that frequently insulate vulnerable groups from mainstream social relationships. Challenging this assumption, Judith Butler's *Vulnerability in Resistance* argues that vulnerability can foster resistance and resilience. This paper examines Arundhati Roy's memoir, *Mother Mary Comes to Me* (2025), as a text that reconceptualises vulnerability as an active and generative force.

The memoir explores the complex relationship between Roy and her mother, Mary Roy, while documenting structural, social, emotional, and embodied vulnerabilities. Mary Roy faced social ostracism, legal exclusion, economic insecurity, and physical vulnerability due to asthma. Her resistance to discriminatory laws and hostile social environments culminated in her emergence as a visionary educator and legal reformer. Arundhati Roy's childhood was marked by instability and inherited precarity shaped by gender and economic insecurity. Her later resistance manifests through political activism, environmental engagement, and dissent against state violence, demonstrating that vulnerability is not passivity but a source of resilience and political solidarity across generations.

Keywords: *Vulnerability, Precarity, Intergenerational Vulnerability, Resistance*

INTRODUCTION

Fundamental human existence is sustained through intricate relationships with the environment, other living beings and social structures. This interdependence makes human beings inherently susceptible to diverse forms of vulnerabilities. Apart from the naturally induced vulnerabilities which primarily affect sustenance, the human-made social structures give rise to other vulnerabilities affecting harmonious and holistic survival in a society. These vulnerabilities are created by various social, political, economic and legal interventions that make life difficult for certain communities. As Judith Butler has rightly said in her work *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable*, vulnerability is a shared condition of human life, one that is intensified or minimised by social, political, and economic structures. (1-3) Governments and organisations have identified certain individuals and communities to be more vulnerable and fragile than others. The vulnerable people are often understood and treated as passive. Various initiatives and programs are organised for their upliftment. But theorists like Judith Butler have put forward that vulnerability is not a passive condition but rather an active agency giving rise to powerful resistance.

It can be argued that feminist memoirs move beyond self-documentation and act as a testimony of personal and sociopolitical developments. It enables suppressed voices to question the dominant institutional structures that regulate cultural prejudices. In *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, the personal and the political boundaries are intertwined. Roy's narrative demonstrates that personal rebellion often anticipates later political dissent. The narratives of vulnerability document experiential knowledge often archived in mainstream historical records. The memoir actively engages the reader's ethical consciousness and political agency, transforming vulnerability into an active force instead of passive suffering.

Mother Mary Comes to Me has been reviewed and analysed primarily as a feminist text portraying the tumultuous relationship between a mother and daughter. It has been compared with similar narratives with dominant mothers yet recognises the central role of mothers in moral and emotional continuity. Helen Epstein finds the memoir absorbing and insightful, especially for understanding both mother and daughter within India's cultural context (Arts Fuse). Works on Arundhati Roy's earlier works examine the social and political milieu of the settings.

This paper examines the 2025 memoir *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, written by Arundhati Roy, as a text treating the condition of vulnerability as a generative site of resistance and defying the passivity associated with it. The memoir chronicles the lives of a mother and daughter, Mary Roy and Arundhati Roy, who faced gendered, legal, political and social vulnerabilities. The memoir also features sustained acts of resistance against the diverse vulnerabilities they encountered. This paper analyses the unique vulnerabilities experienced by individuals of different identities and their

individual acts of resistance. Further, the concept of inherited vulnerability transmitted across generations, not merely as trauma, but as a political agency catering to resistance and active action, is put to critical examination.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Judith Butler, in her book *Vulnerability in Resistance*, contends about the dominant conceptions of agency as paternal and vulnerability as the site of inaction. She says that the concepts of vulnerability and resistance are not mutually oppositional; rather, “vulnerability is part of resistance, made manifest by new forms of embodied political interventions and modes of alliance characterised by interdependency and public action” (Butler et al. 7). She makes a proper distinction between precariousness and precarity. As stated in the introduction, the lives of human beings are interrelated. This shared condition of human life posits vulnerability. “Precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other” (Butler *Precarious Life* 14). “Precarity is a politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others” (Butler *Frames of War* 25).

Martha Albertson Fineman’s 2004 book *The Autonomy Myth: A Theory of Dependency* critiques the liberal legal subject premised on independence and self-reliance. Fineman argues that vulnerability and dependency are universal and constant features of the human condition, managed unevenly by institutions such as family, law, and the state. Vulnerabilities, as theorised by Butler and Fineman, can be understood as embodied, relational, and structurally produced. Both theorists have addressed the vulnerabilities and resistance concerning the public domain. This paper focuses on how vulnerability is transmitted through domestic spaces across generations. It studies the effects of generational vulnerability on caregivers and receivers. Alongside the transmission of vulnerability, the spirit of resistance is also passed down, paving the way for an early development of political and ethical consciousness.

STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITY

The memoir narrates the life of Mary Roy, a Christian woman who married a Bengali man and got separated. Struggling to find a job where the couple resided, Mary Roy travels to Ooty to her ancestral home as a single mother accompanied by her two children. She finds a job as a schoolteacher with a meagre salary, inadequate to sustain a decent living. She saved upon rent, as she lived in her ancestral house. Mary Roy faces an unforeseen challenge when her mother and brother threaten her with eviction. They invoke the Travancore Succession Act, asserting that daughters have no right to ancestral property. “Structural vulnerability describes a positionality that imposes physical and emotional suffering on specific population groups and individuals in patterned ways.” (Quesada et al. 340).

Her position as a separated, single mother creates exclusive patterns of vulnerabilities. Her economic vulnerability is intensified due to the social ostracism meted out to a single mother separated from her husband of a different religion and systemic exclusion. The legal denial of inheritance is one of the foremost structural vulnerabilities that she encounters. Mary Roy experiences precarity, apart from the precariousness that arises for a human being searching for shelter and a means of livelihood. The tumultuous emotions faced by Mary Roy and her young children to prevent themselves from getting evicted clearly foreground the emotional maturity gained for being vulnerable. “But we more than understood the emotions at play: intimidation, fear, anger, panic, reassurance, relief, triumph” (Roy 12).

The family had to live like fugitives, with no stable income, dependent on informal networks. Mary Roy becomes bedridden due to chronic asthma, and the children are sent alone to shops. They survived on credit and kindness. The lived vulnerability shapes the childhood and emotional life of the children. The harsh episodes have later transformed Mary Roy and Arundhati Roy in their perspectives on life and political agency. It would be a while before Mrs Roy filed her petition. “For all her volatility, she was capable of being a patient hunter” (Roy 96). The patience transforms into the loudest resistance when she challenges the Travancore Succession Act and secures equality for the women around. Mary Roy challenges the legal structure that amplifies gendered vulnerability. Her resistance is slow, legal and institutional. Her persistent efforts culminated in a historic judgement granting equal inheritance rights to Christian women. The structural vulnerability has been transformed into feminist legal resistance. Her economic vulnerability has not weakened her but rather become a source of institutional resistance. She became the founder of the prestigious institution named *Pallikoodam* in Kottayam. Her educational qualifications and unflinching personality led her to build an institution supporting helpless students and offering quality education. The school becomes a source of economic stability and an ethical project.

Religion and caste act as carriers of social vulnerability. The respect shown toward any person depended on their social status within their community. Mary Roy and her children had to face marginalisation, even within their own Syrian Christian community. Arundhati and her brother had to face the stigma of being fatherless children. The stigma is nurtured by everyone in the community when the cook Kochu Maria speaks about “the shameful of having fatherless children living under the same roof as decent people” (Roy 19). Respectability is replaced with competence and authority. In a society where a woman’s moral worth is tied to marriage, obedience to family and church, and endurance in the face of resistance, Mary Roy chooses to leave her marriage, reject reconciliation, and raise her children alone.

Arundhati Roy, known for her social activism and political agency, had early awareness about unjust vulnerabilities. Her political dissent against the state-sanctioned injustices and

environmental struggles echoes this early exposure to unjust legality. Her identification with displaced communities, economically marginalised people and anti-capitalist movements is rooted in her lived vulnerability aided by structural inequalities. Her political writing and activism against neoliberal powers are a form of resistance against the displacement threats and economic vulnerabilities she confronted.

AFFECTIVE VULNERABILITY

Affective vulnerability is the condition of being emotionally exposed through the relationships that individuals and communities share while living in a society. To be vulnerable is to be given over to the other, to be dependent on what is outside oneself. (Butler *Precarious Life* 20) It emphasises that emotions are not merely private or personal but that they are socially produced, politically mediated, and historically conditioned. It highlights how feelings themselves—grief, attachment, shame, hope, fear—become sites of vulnerability and resistance.

Relational vulnerability emerges within relationships of care where caregivers and receivers get affected. The children's dependency on an unstable carer influences their later consciousness and emotional well-being. Parents can be considered the safest places for children when they have emotional and physical stability and an equally stable and supportive environment. The circumstances around Mary Roy were not peaceful and promising. Arundhati Roy learns that "the safest place can be the most dangerous" (Roy 25).

The structural inequalities were the most significant hurdles that Mary Roy had to overcome to build an economically stable environment for herself and the kids. Her emotional volatility is the result of these vulnerabilities. She had chronic asthma, which made her physically dependent on others. She was a strict parent who treated her kids without sympathy. Mary Roy's unapologetic assertion of her ideologies in her school and society is her resistance against being unacknowledged. "She conducted herself with the edginess of a gangster" (Roy 5). Mary Roy's emotional overextension becomes a form of resistance when she becomes the mother to hundreds of children. "Once she started her school, she was no longer only my mother" (Roy 32). She transforms her affective vulnerability into institutional ethics and offers radical care without sentimentality.

Arundhati Roy speaks about a cold moth being her constant companion. The cold moth is symbolic of her emotional withdrawal from being in the vicinity of acts of love and care. "My old friend the cold moth had paid me a visit unannounced" (Roy 26). Her life in Delhi, along with her marriages and life choices, reflects the unstable sense of self that she developed during her formative years. She distances herself from her mother as a means of survival. This emotional dislocation, along with hypervigilance, fear, and silence, results from inherited affective vulnerability. Roy has learned to be observant and sensitive toward people and the environment around her. Her writing becomes an act

of resistance. Narration becomes an act of reconstruction and restores boundaries.

EMBODIED VULNERABILITY

Embodied vulnerability refers to the condition in which the human body becomes the primary site through which vulnerability is experienced, regulated, disciplined, or resisted. Embodied vulnerability emphasises that vulnerability is not merely psychological or social but is lived through the body, shaped by social norms, gender ideologies, and cultural expectations. The body is exposed to social and political forces; it is vulnerable by definition. (Butler *Frames of War* 25) At the same time, the body can become a site of resistance, where suffering is transformed into agency, defiance, and political action. Women's and children's bodies remain unprotected by family, church or state. Mary Roy's asthma dictates movement and shapes the living conditions for herself and her kids. It shapes the household dynamics. Even though her bodily vulnerability demands her to be dependent on people, illness becomes a means of authority, not weakness. The body becomes a site of control and fear. "Each attack was an event. A piece of theatre" (Roy 33). The asthma attacks in Ooty created a survival threat as it reduced mobility and employability. But after she became a headmistress, the asthma attacks "created a flutter in the whole school" (Roy 33). Illness is no longer hidden or apologetic. It was performed, witnessed, and responded to. She reclaims the authority over her body. Mary Roy strategically deploys her vulnerability. Roy explicitly acknowledges her mother's tactical awareness: "I think she recognised quickly that ill-health was a useful way of controlling people, keeping them on the hop" (Roy 33), through which she reinforces her centrality.

Women's and children's bodies are objectified. One of the most disturbing moments in the memoir is the 'Kottayam Santa' episode when the child's body becomes a site of threat and surveillance. "A snuffling and a groping between my legs and a rolling-down of my underwear" (Roy 34). Silence and hypervigilance become the means of resistance. "Hide in the crowd. Make sure never to be alone" (Roy 35). The 'Kottayam Santa' functions as a symbolic figure of respectable patriarchy—an elderly male authority whose public benevolence masks private sexual violence, exposing how embodied vulnerability in children is intensified by social reverence and silence. The strategic silence and bodily awareness transform into feminist political clarity reflected in her writings. She rejects the romanticisation of authority and critiques the power structures that facilitate abuse.

CONCLUSION

The conditions of vulnerability are transmitted across generations, where the social, economic, emotional and embodied experiences of one generation shape the life chances, bodily experiences, and emotional worlds of the next. It is accumulated and passed on through memory, trauma, silence, and structural constraints. Intergenerational vulnerability often coexists with intergenerational resistance. The same histories that transmit vulnerability can also transmit defiance, ethical refusal, political

consciousness, and survival strategies. It reveals how a private life is deeply political.

Eviction threats and legal humiliation are the foremost vulnerability transmitted across generations. “She would shield and safeguard this memory of her mortification as though it were a precious family heirloom, which, in a way, it was” (Roy 12.) The children inherited fear before she inherited her rights. Law seems to be a threat rather than protection. Mary Roy converts this humiliation into the historic Supreme Court ruling revoking the Travancore Succession Act. The daughter inherits the legal consciousness and the courage to confront unjust systemic institutions. Vulnerability becomes an intergenerational archive of political memory enabling resistance.

Mary Roy’s chronic asthma structures Arundhati Roy’s childhood around constant anticipation of death. Anxiety, vigilance, and preparedness are inherited by Arundhati Roy. “I tried to breathe for her. I became her lungs. Her body” (Roy 34). Illness is not merely transmitted as fear but as endurance, vigilance and an ethical conscience. These become the emotional foundations of Roy’s later political writing.

The Kottayam Santa episode becomes a nodal point of sexual vulnerability, where the victim inherits silence, shame, and self-surveillance. In the earlier stage Roy develops survival rules: “Hide in the crowd. Never be alone. Be alert” (Roy 35), as a means of resistance that later transforms into writing and retrospective testimony. Silence as a survival strategy is articulated in the form of narrative resistance.

Mary Roy is emotionally violent, unpredictable, and unsentimental. Arundhati Roy grows up in a volatile emotional environment. As a result, love becomes inseparable from fear. Roy teaches emotional distance, analytical self-reflection, and narrative reconstruction. Writing becomes the space where pain is examined, not denied. “She was my shelter and my storm” (Roy 8). Emotional harm does not destroy agency; instead, it generates a heightened capacity for introspection, narrative control, and ethical complexity. *Mother Mary Comes to Me* unsettles conventional understandings of inheritance by shifting the focus away from property, stability, or protection and towards vulnerability itself as a transmissible condition. A sustained exposure to precarity as a way of life is Mary Roy’s asset for Arundhati. Legal exclusion, economic instability, embodied illness, and emotional volatility sediment themselves into memory, behaviour, and affect. Vulnerability, in this sense, is not episodic or accidental but intergenerational—carried forward through bodies, silences, habits of vigilance, and the constant anticipation of loss. Mary Roy’s confrontations against societal vulnerabilities act as an orientation towards defiance itself. Resistance is inherited as a disposition—the courage to confront injustice, the refusal to normalise suffering, and the willingness to endure social illegitimacy in order to claim autonomy. What the daughter inherits is not her mother’s battles, but her mother’s refusal to submit. Resistance is portrayed as adaptive and generationally transformed. Where Mary Roy wages

her struggle through institutions—schools, courts, and administrative authority—Arundhati Roy translates that legacy into language, memory, and narrative testimony. Writing becomes the space in which inherited vulnerability is neither erased nor romanticised but examined, named, and politically repositioned. In this way, personal memory is converted into collective critique, and private suffering becomes part of a broader ethical and political imagination.

Mother Mary Comes to Me suggests that inheritance need not be understood as the transmission of damage alone. The memoir thus reframes intergenerational inheritance not as a burden that forecloses agency, but as a complex legacy in which vulnerability itself becomes the ground from which resistance repeatedly, and differently, emerges. *Mother Mary Comes to Me* ultimately argues that while vulnerability is inherited through bodies, laws, and silences, resistance too is inherited as a capacity to endure, confront, and reimagine survival across generations.

Work Cited

Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Verso, 2009.

---. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso, 2004.

Butler, Judith, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, editors. *Vulnerability in Resistance*. Duke University Press, 2016.

Fineman, Martha Albertson. *The Autonomy Myth: A Theory of Dependency*. The New Press, 2004.

Fuse, The Arts. “Book Review: India through a Daughter’s Eyes: The Turbulent Journey of *Mother Mary Comes to Me*.” *The Arts Fuse*, 4 Oct. 2025, artsfuse.org/317909/book-review-india-through-a-daughters-eyes-the-turbulent-journey-of-mother-mary-comes-to-me/.

Quesada, James, Laurie Kain Hart, and Philippe Bourgois. “Structural Vulnerability and Health: Latino Migrant Laborers in the United States.” *Medical Anthropology*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2011, pp. 339–62.

Roy, Arundhati. *Mother Mary Comes to Me*. Penguin Random House India, 2025.