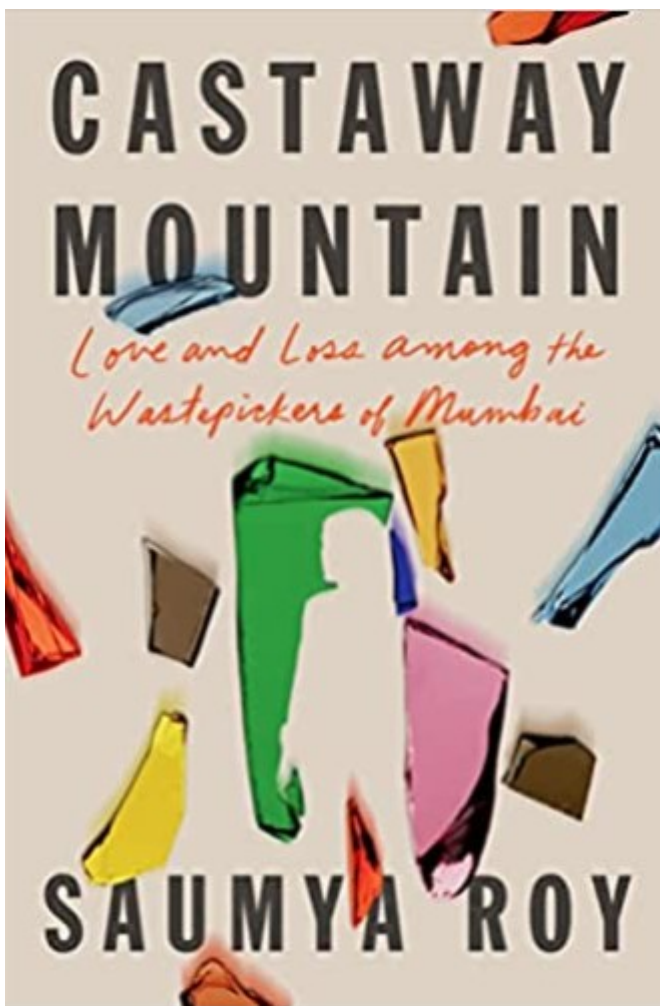


Saumya Roy lets Mumbai's garbage pickers speak for themselves

***Castaway Mountain* gives voice to families who have been impoverished by the whims of the powerful.**

by [Sandhya Rani Jha](#) in the [January 12, 2022](#) issue

In Review



Castaway Mountain

Love and Loss among the Wastepickers of Mumbai

By Saumya Roy

Astra House

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When I was seven years old and on the first family trip to India I'd be able to remember, I was told in no uncertain terms that my horror at the conditions of poor people was decidedly Western. So it is understandable that Saumya Roy—who grew up in Mumbai and even wrote about wealth inequality in her days as a journalist—didn't know about the lives of the people who lived on top of the trash dumps of Mumbai's Deonar locality until she later began offering them microloans. As Roy points out, the city's culture is designed to render invisible both waste and poverty.

The setting of *Castaway Mountain* is a towering, 120-foot-tall mountain of trash on the long, thin island that is Mumbai. The city is home to more than 20 million people, and around 600,000 of them live in the vicinity of the 300-acre Deonar trash dump. In 2010, Roy left journalism for a career in charity, focusing on microloans. The people who inspired her the most were the garbage pickers she began to encounter in 2013. *Castaway Mountain* seeks to tell their stories from their own perspectives, rather than mediated through Roy's experiences. Although every book is shaped by the social location of its author, Roy does an admirable job of letting her subjects speak for themselves.

The book invites readers to go with Roy on a ten-year journey, beginning with a 2009 court case filed by a nearby resident that demands that the trash dumps be managed to reduce the horrific toxin exposure they create. At the same time, the book traces the history of colonialism, waste, consumerism, and class all the way back to 1899—the year when trash began to collect in that part of the British colony after a severe outbreak of bubonic plague caused by its previous waste management strategy.

The people who populate the hills of Deonar are relatable: they want their children to have a better life. They end up in debt because every plan to have a better life requires money they don't have, and loans come at percentages that ensure they'll always owe their lenders. Kids help with the family business of trash picking. They also play and gossip and fight and fall in love and get hurt. The consequences of

mistakes end up being very severe. Readers may find their hearts being pulled by the fates of strangers 8,000 miles away, which is a testament to Roy's solid writing.

Two themes in the book seem particularly germane to clergy, chaplains, and other care workers for people living in poverty. The first is that even as people try to extract themselves from life on the mountain, the mountain has an almost gravitational pull that draws them back. It takes an extraordinary amount of both effort and good luck to extricate oneself from poverty. The magnetic pull of the mountain functions as a metaphor for the lack of good options for people in poverty. Many of the people profiled in *Castaway Mountain* are Muslims, and their story is unfolding in a country where Muslim people often have fewer opportunities than upper-caste Hindus.

Another theme is the power of the whims of people with means. In Deonar, people who have the luxury of throwing things away are the ones who shape the lives of those without means. The type of trash that shows up affects the choices and strategies of the trash pickers, which change as wealthy Mumbaikars shift to a more disposable lifestyle. The location of the trash is determined by people with resources on behalf of other people who have resources, regardless of the needs or hopes of the people who live on and survive off the land in question.

When the trash of wealthy residents is redirected to a different area, the people in Deonar engage in more dangerous strategies to collect medical waste or engage in illegal activities to support their families. They also seek out opportunities to participate in medical testing for the benefit of countries that don't want to test their own people. These tests usually result in medicines that are inaccessible to the Indian people whose bodies helped produce them. Roy finds the origins of such patterns in colonialism and shows how they were reinforced as postcolonial Mumbai made itself in the image of capitalism and consumerism.

As I read *Castaway Mountain*, I kept thinking of the seven-year-old me who was so horrified by the rampant poverty in India—and of my middle-class friends' and family members' inability to see it right there in plain sight. I also kept thinking about how the 45-year-old me contributes to that poverty, both with my own consumption and with my nation's reliance on cheap labor that results in poverty in the United States, India, and elsewhere.

It's possible, maybe, to read *Castaway Mountain* as the story of a foreign place with no direct connection to our daily lives. Yet, at its best, the book invites us to reflect on what we have created and to imagine how we might partner in creating something different.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Life on the garbage heap."