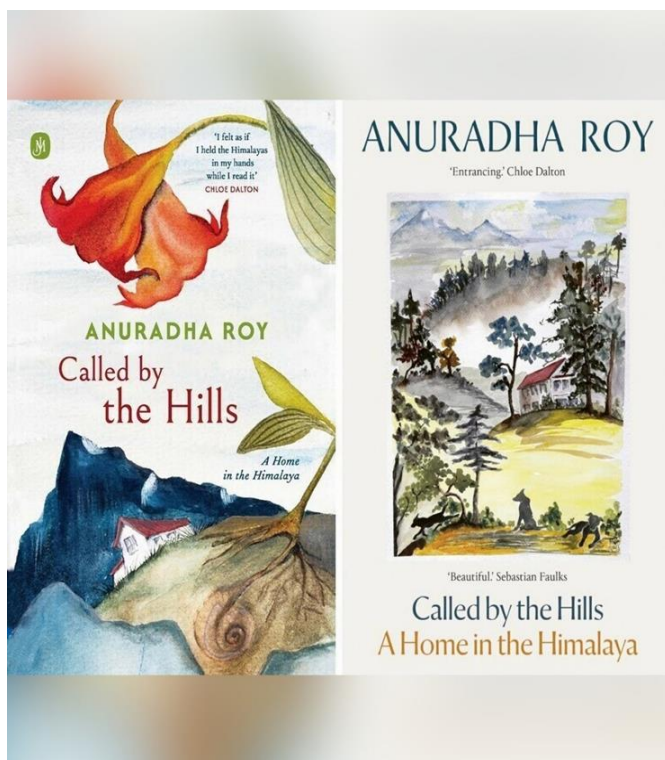


Anuradha Roy. *Called by the Hills: A Home in the Himalaya*. New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2025, 1- 172 pp. ISBN: 978-93-94046-64-4



What makes us pick up a book? Sometimes it is the title, sometimes the cover, and often the author's name. With *Called by the Hills: A Home in the Himalaya*, all three work together to create an immediate sense of invitation. The title itself carries the distant pull of the mountains — that longing for a retreat which quietly exists within so many of us, especially amid the exhaustion and relentless pace of metropolitan life.

Anuradha Roy left Delhi years ago and moved to Ranikhet with her husband and their dogs. That decision quietly shapes the emotional core of this memoir. *Called by the Hills* is not merely a romantic account of escape from the city; rather, it is about learning how to inhabit another rhythm of life altogether.

At first glance, the book appears to be a memoir centred on life in the Himalayas. Yet to describe it simply as a memoir would be reductive. It moves fluidly between gardening, ecology, literature, memory, solitude, and the fragile relationship between human beings and the natural world. Roy pays homage to earlier writings on the hills. She cites passages from Leela Majumdar's *Aar*

*Konokhane* (Somewhere Else) (1967), Bill Aitken's *Footloose in the Himalayas* (2003), Frank Smythe's *Valley of Flowers* (1938), and Halldor Laxness's *Independent People* (1934). Through these literary echoes, she gradually constructs her own deeply lived landscape of Ranikhet.

What makes the book remarkable is its attentiveness. Roy notices everything: the shape of her estate "like a tongue," the stubbornness of plants, the appearance of scorpions displaced by human intrusion, the rhythm of dawn and dusk in a town where life still follows light rather than the clock (Roy 1). Through such details, the memoir gently forces readers to confront how modern existence is estranged from the earth itself. Roy writes that unless one feels soil on one's fingertips and the smell of earth lingering on the skin, one can never fully understand humanity's connection with nature. That idea quietly becomes the philosophical centre of the book.

Roy's language is fluid, personal, and deeply sensory. Her prose lingers — it watches, it waits. In many ways, the writing mirrors mountain life itself, where even waiting acquires another meaning altogether. Silence is not emptiness here; it becomes a way of inhabiting time. She speaks of the profound significance of feeling soil cling to her fingertips, of letting her feet become ensnared in wild creepers, and of carrying the scent of earth upon her body — an intimacy with the land that dissolves boundaries between self and nature (Roy 75). How else do we realise how man is linked with nature at the end of it all? Her botanical art flowers on every page, adding colour to her stories, and even a set of postcards blooms as an extra burst of delight for the reader. Unlike her fiction, this memoir is slower and more intimate. It mirrors the pace of life in the hills — unhurried, attentive to detail, and imbued with quiet reflection.

Ranikhet emerges not merely as a backdrop but as a living presence. There are old colonial bungalows, abandoned churches, graveyards with marble angels, little shops on the mall, and winding bridle paths leading to distant villages. Electricity is uncertain, lives revolve around cows and goats, mountain dogs, langurs and predatory leopards, *Daturas* and *Nicotianas*, harsh winters and flowery springs, and the Himalayas remain both constant and shifting at once — ancient, immense, indifferent. Roy captures both the grandeur and ordinariness of the hills without romanticising them excessively. The mountains here are beautiful, but they are also lonely, difficult, and demanding.

Among the memoir's most memorable figures is Amma — the stern yet perceptive matriarch. Amma was the wife of the Cottage's former chowkidar, appointed to serve the retired Burra Sahib. When the cottage passed into the hands of the author and her husband, Amma remained as much a part of its inheritance as the walls themselves. Now aged and bent, her body shrivelled to

the fragile size of a child, she endures quietly at the heart of the narrative. More than a figure of memory, Amma becomes its moral centre — an unassuming presence whose constancy anchors the narrative. Through Amma's stories, recipes, habits, and disapproval, Roy learns the hills not as a tourist but as someone slowly being allowed entry into another way of life. Around Amma gather eccentric neighbours, borrowed recipes, local idioms, and fragments of everyday existence that lend the memoir much of its warmth and texture.

At another level, the book is also about labour and patience. Gardens in Roy's world are never ornamental fantasies. Saplings fail. Lemon trees refuse to bear fruit. Seeds resist care. Yet hollyhocks bloom unexpectedly one season and suddenly transform a boundary wall into something alive. Roy recalls walking between flowerpots on a cramped veranda in Delhi and then returning to the spur of the mountains ringed by great old trees. Before climate change muddled the seasons, she learned to coax flowers into bloom despite adversity. The memoir blends wilderness with concrete scars of construction and talks about the fragile coexistence of man and nature. It is a diary of resilience, a meditation on waiting, and a celebration of gardens — rhododendrons, irises, lilies, geraniums, carnations, and roses. Gardening becomes less an aesthetic pursuit and more a metaphor for resilience itself — an act of faith practised slowly over time.

Written over years and through the stillness of the COVID-19 pandemic, the memoir also carries the uncertainty of those years, the awareness of ecological fragility, and the loneliness of modern existence. Yet it never collapses into despair. Instead, it gently insists that another kind of life remains possible — a life where one learns to notice seasons again, where waiting is not wasted time, and where companionship may emerge from the plants that surround you, from animals, from neighbours, or simply from the changing light on a mountain slope.

The very title itself invests the hills with a persona — an almost sentient presence capable of reaching out to a sensitive, yearning soul. This personification underscores the memoir's spiritual undertone, where landscape is not backdrop but interlocutor, a companion in solitude and crisis. Although Roy identifies as an atheist, the narrative is suffused with a search for the "sacred" — in mountains, rain, soil, flowers, birds, and through the act of tending to living things (Roy 102). In her gaze, divinity resides in the very fabric of nature itself. This is not the Romantic exaltation of nature in the Wordsworthian sense, but rather a humble recognition of its pristine presence, a reverence that feels rare in our time. Especially during the COVID-19 crisis, her relationship with the natural world becomes a form of spiritual quest: a way of finding meaning, solace, and continuity in the fragile yet enduring rhythms of life.

What stands out to the reader is the absence of a glossary. Local phrases and colloquial words are left untranslated, unmediated. This choice resists domestication and insists on the integrity of place and language. It allows the reader to encounter the text as one encounters a terrain: with its textures, resistances, and unfamiliar rhythms intact. In doing so, Roy preserves the authenticity of lived experience, refusing to smooth away the rough edges of locality for the sake of accessibility.

*Called by the Hills* lingers because it speaks to forgotten desires: the wish to live more slowly, to belong somewhere quietly, to build rituals around food, plants, books, rain, and conversation. For readers exhausted by noise and acceleration, Roy's memoir becomes a temporary shelter that offers solace to a mind wearied by the fast pace of modern existence, gently reminding readers that not every form of survival must come at the cost of softness. And perhaps that is its greatest achievement—not offering escapism exactly, but reminding readers that gentleness, stillness, and beauty continue to exist in the world, waiting patiently to be rediscovered.

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