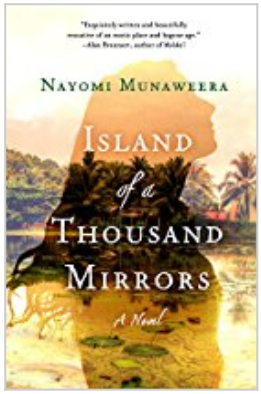

Island of a Thousand Mirrors: A Novel

By Nayomi Munaweera

Island of a Thousand Mirrors: A Novel By Nayomi Munaweera

Before violence tore apart the tapestry of Sri Lanka and turned its pristine beaches red, there were two families. Yasodhara tells the story of her own Sinhala family, rich in love, with everything they could ask for. As a child in idyllic Colombo, Yasodhara's and her siblings' lives are shaped by social hierarchies, their parents' ambitions, teenage love and, subtly, the differences between Tamil and Sinhala people; but the peace is shattered by the tragedies of war. Yasodhara's family escapes to Los Angeles. But Yasodhara's life has already become intertwined with a young Tamil girl's…

Saraswathie is living in the active war zone of Sri Lanka, and hopes to become a teacher. But her dreams for the future are abruptly stamped out when she is arrested by a group of Sinhala soldiers and pulled into the very heart of the conflict that she has tried so hard to avoid – a conflict that, eventually, will connect her and Yasodhara in unexpected ways.
Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* is an emotionally resonant saga of cultural heritage, heartbreaking conflict and deep family bonds. Narrated in two unforgettably authentic voices and spanning the entirety of the decades-long civil war, it offers an unparalleled portrait of a beautiful land during its most difficult moment by a spellbinding new literary talent who promises tremendous things to come.

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Editorial Review

Review
"A searing tale of the Sri Lankan civil war...Nayomi Munaweera breathes life into the beauty and terror of that era through her delicate, bittersweet prose. An unforgettable novel."--Yangsze Choo, author of "The Ghost Bride", international bestseller in SE Asia and Oprah.com's Book of the Week

"A novel of the heart...The colour, tastes, sounds and smells of Sri Lanka ooze from its pages, vibrant and intoxicating, but as beauty turns to brutality our sympathies are tossed between two young women whose different paths are fashioned by the violence of civil war, but whose inner humanity is never forgotten." --Sarah Dunant, author of "Blood and Beauty" and "Birth of Venus

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"By turns tender, beautiful, and devastating, Island of A Thousand Mirrors is a deeply resonant tale of an unraveling Sri Lanka. Incredibly moving, complex, and with prose you may want to eat, this debut is a triumph."--NoViolet Bulawayo, award-winning author of "We Need New Names

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""The three women and the core of this ambitious, globe-spanning story show us, heartbreakingly, that we are linked by more than nation, more than race, more, even than blood. A dark, beautiful, transporting debut."--V.V.Ganeshananathan, author of "Love Marriage
"

About the Author

Nayomi Munaweera was born in Sri Lanka and grew up in Nigeria. She immigrated to the United States in her early teens and now lives in Oakland, California. *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, her debut novel, won the 2013 Commonwealth Book Prize for the Asian Region and was longlisted for the 2012 Man Asian Literary Prize.

Priya Ayyar is an actor and writer with a BFA and MFA from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. Her acting credits for television and film include *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, *All My Children*, and the documentary *The Children of War*. She has appeared on stage in *War of the Unheard*, *Aminta*, and *The Road Home*, and she has written and performed in the plays *Karmic Fusion* and *Losing Remote Control*.

one

It is 1948 and the last British ships slip away from the island of Ceylon, laboring and groaning under the weight of purloined treasure. On board one such vessel, the captain's log includes the tusks and legs of elephant herds; rubies, emeralds, topaz; fragrant mountains of cinnamon, cardamom, mustard seeds; forests of ebony, teak, and sandalwood; screeching peacocks; caged and pacing leopards; ten-foot-long monitor lizards whipping their razor tails; barrels of fermented coconut toddy; the jewel-encrusted thrones of Kandyan kings; the weapons of Chola warriors; priceless texts in Pali and Sanskrit, Sinhala and Tamil.

At the foam-drenched stern, a blue-eyed, walnut-burnt sahib searches for the vanishing island and says to his pale young wife, "A shame, really. Such a nice little place."

And she, only recently having left Manchester for the colony and now returning in triumph, a husband successfully hunted and captured, says, "But so hot! And the mosquitoes! It will be such a comfort to be home again."

The Englishman contemplates the meaning of this word, "home," remembers decades of waving palms, soft sarongs against his thighs, the quick fingers and lithe embraces of burnt brown bodies. He has not seen the dome of St. Paul's for ten years. On his last visit to the frigid metropolis, he had felt an odd creature, neither fish nor fowl, smirked at by elegant ladies, his skin chaffed, fingers stiff and unable to determine between fish and salad fork. A sort of anger rises in his throat.

He tells himself that he will no longer dream of palm trees and sunshine. His wife takes refuge under his arm, her breast knowingly close to his fingertips. She utters a quick, coquettish laugh. She knows she has sufficient charms to distract him from his island memories. He turns his head resolutely away from the fast-disappearing island and toward the other, colder one ahead of him. His eyes are bone dry.

Behind the retreating Englishman, on the new nation's flag is poised a stylized lion, all curving flank and ornate muscle, a long, cruel sword gripped in its front paw. It is the ancient symbol of the Sinhala, who believe that they are descended from the lovemaking between an exiled Indian princess and a large jungle cat. A green stripe represents that small and much-tossed Muslim population. An orange stripe represents the larger, Tamil minority.

But in the decades that are coming, race riots and discrimination will render the orange stripe inadequate. It will be replaced by a new flag. On its face, a snarling tiger, all bared fang and bristling whisker. If the idea of militancy is not conveyed strongly enough, dagger-clawed paws burst forth while crossed rifles rear over the cat's head.

A rifle-toting tiger. A sword-gripping lion. This is a war that will be waged between related beasts.

* * *

My name is Yasodhara Rajasinghe and this is the story of my family. It is also one possible narrative of my island. But we are always interlopers into history, dropped into a story that has been going on far before we are born, and so I must start much earlier than my birth and I must start with the boy who will become my father.

As the last British ships slip over the horizon, my seven-year-old father-to-be, Nishan, cavorts on beaches he does not know are pristine. He dives into an ocean unpolluted by the gasoline-powered tourist boats of the future.

In the months before the thunderous monsoon, the ocean tugs at his toes, wraps sinuous limbs about his own, and pulls him into its embrace, out until it is deep enough to dive, headfirst, feet overhead, inverted and submerged. Eyes open against stinging salt, he sees coral like a crowded, crumbling city, busy with variously marked, spotted, dotted, striped, lit, pompous, and playful sea creatures. Now and then, he encounters the curious, swiveling eye of a small red octopus emerging from secret passageways. Approached recklessly, the octopus blanches a pure white, and with an inky ejaculation torpedoes away. So he learns to approach slowly, in rhythm with the gently rolling water, until the creature coming to know this stick-limbed biped is lulled enough to allow his quiet presence.

Farther out beyond the reef, where the coral gives way to the true deep, at a certain time of day a tribe of flat silver fish gather in their thousands. To be there is to be surrounded by living shards of light. At a secret signal, all is chaos, a thousand mirrors shattering about him. Then the school speeds to sea and the boy is left in sedate water, a tug and pull of the body as comfortable as sitting in his father's outspread sarong being sung to sleep.

When he emerges dripping from the sea, it is to find this father, the village Ayurvedic doctor, perched on an upturned catamaran, deep in conversation with the fisherfolk who squat on their heels before him.

The fishermen wear sarongs splotched with octopus ink. Their hands are leathered by handling rope, mending nets, wrestling sharks by their tails onto the beach. They are ruthless with the flesh of the creatures they catch, upturning gentle sea turtles in the sand to carve off chunks of the living flesh. The turtles bleed slowly, drip salt tears from the corners of their ancient eyes. In this way the meat stays fresh for days, the fishermen explain. For similar reasons the fishermen grasp just caught octopuses and turn them inside out, exposing delicate internals that flash through cycles of color. Decades later, in America, when my father sees Christmas lights for the first time, he will astound us with the observation that they look just like dying octopuses.

The sun drops fast, blazing momentarily crimson on the horizon. Father and son wander home. At the front door, his mother, Beatrice Muriel, waits, a lantern in her hand. In her other hand, she grips the shoulder of Nishan's twin sister, Mala, who by dint of her girlhood is not allowed on beach wanderings. Beatrice Muriel ignores her husband. She is angry that they have spent the day with the fisherfolk, listening to fisher songs, picking up fisher habits, coming home covered in beach sand. It is too dark to bathe, she scolds. Cold well water after the sun has set will result in sneezing and a runny nose. "Running here and there, like a savage.

One day I will find you up a coconut tree with the toddy tappers. That's the day I will skin you alive. Wait and see if I don't."

As she scolds, she pulls the bones out of fried fish with deft fingers, mixes it with red rice and coconut sambal into balls, which she pops into the mouths of her children: a bird feeding its chicks. Her monologue ceases only when the plate is empty.

Afterward, he goes to sleep on the straw mat next to Mala, sea sand frosting his limbs and gritty in his hair and eyelashes, the dark shapes of his parents on either side of them, their breathing soothing him into sleep.

His mother, Beatrice Muriel, comes from a prominent southern family peopled with Vincents, Victorias, Annie-Henriettas, Elizabeths, and Herberts in tribute to the former ruling race. Now, after marriage to the Hikkaduwa Ayurvedic doctor, she is the village schoolteacher. In the small classroom, open to the sea breezes, she teaches the children to read, leads them as they chant loudly an English menagerie: "Q IS FOR QUAIL! R IS FOR ROBIN! S IS FOR ESQUIRREL!" In the sultry afternoons, she teaches them to work numbers so that they will not be cheated when the Colombo buyers come for fish.

Seven years before, Beatrice Muriel, at the age of sixteen, married for a year, finds herself bloodless and nauseous. Her new husband examines her tongue, pulls back her eyelids, nods his head, but propriety will not allow him to name her ailment. Three months later, as custom demands, he sends her home to her mother by swaying bullock cart.

In the ancestral house, she is fed and pampered, stroked and coddled. When the pains begin, she labors surrounded by the various women of her family. Her mother parts her thighs, whispers endearments and encouragements into her sweating ears.

There are the usual hours of sweat-drenched, pushing, ripping pain before a tiny creature slips forth. A boy! The gods have been benevolent! But wait, Beatrice Muriel on her childhood bed is still sweating, still straining and pushing. With a final effort, a great gush of red, another child slips headfirst from salt water into the wide, airy world. The women submerge the child in the waiting basin of water, hoping to reveal some lighter, more appropriately golden skin tone. The water turns hue, but the baby does not, and Beatrice Muriel, taking in the pair, one eggplant hued and the other milk-tea fair, cries, "If only it had been the boy who was so dark! This black-black girl! We will never get her married." To which her mother joins, "A darkie granddaughter. Such a shade we have never had in our family. Must be from the father's side!" There, revealed for all to see, on the skin of this girl, the stain of low-caste origins. Beatrice Muriel, torn and exhausted from birthing, hangs her head in shame.

Because by this time what had not been known before the nuptials has since been revealed. Namely, that sometime in the years before seeking out matrimony, the Doctor had paid a visit to the local registrar's office, where he had worked a sort of alchemy. A handsome bribe to replace his family name, Aposinghe, with its fishy associations and marketplace odors, for the princely sounding Rajasinghe. In this way the Doctor, like so many low-caste persons, had escaped the limitations of fate to win both medical training and wife.

The back room of the house is the Doctor's dispensary. On the walls, dusty emerald bottles display their variously oily or transparent contents. On the verandah, patients gather each morning. They are fishermen and farmers who often pay in kind. A large thora fish for the health of a child, a pound of paddy rice for an ointment to ease a grandmother's arthritic knees. The Doctor is dedicated to this motley group of patients, but lacks further ambition and is most satisfied walking the beach with his children.

Often Beatrice Muriel finds him in conversation with fishermen, toddy tappers, servants, sometimes even the

Tamil coolie who comes to empty the latrine buckets each dawn. When she sees him talking to this blackened djinn who smells of shit and carries the stiff-bristled broom with which he performs his inauspicious duties, it takes all her willpower to walk past them, her stiffly held head eloquent in its disapproval.

She has been brought up with definite ideas about the value of each thing and person, its significance and appropriate place on a strict hierarchy. She is unable to tolerate this laxity, her husband's inability or indeed conscious decision not to treat each person according to ancient laws. Her anger takes aim for her husband's head through her children's ears.

"In my father's day, those people kept out of sight. If one of them had come into the village spreading misfortune and bad smells everywhere, he would have been beaten with his shitty broom. This is your father's fault. Talking to these people. Treating them like every other person. If it were up to him, you know what you all would be doing?" Big-eyed children attempt to imagine. "You would be gathering up shit with that one. Would you like that? Going door to door in the morning emptying out the buckets of kakka with your hands and a small broom?" Children shaking their heads emphatically. No, they would definitely not like that.

To counter her husband's carelessness, Beatrice Muriel buys thora fish. She boils it slowly and then pours the water on the thirsty earth of the front yard. She sets the dish in front of her family with great festivity. "Now they will know what kind of people we are." Outside, the pungent odor rises. Passersby inhale with distended nostrils and know that the family has feasted on the most expensive sea fish.

Those less fortunate eat dried fish while the truly destitute fight with the spiny shells of crabs or lobsters. Decades later, my father will find it incomprehensible that Americans crave what in his childhood was considered repugnant fare. He will look at seafood menus with wonder and shake his head at the truly inexplicable nature of human beings.

* * *

One midnight, the singing of bullfrogs is shattered by human pandemonium. Shouting men burst into the house. They grasp a young fisherman by the arms and legs like a heavy sack of rice, heave him onto the Doctor's table where he writhes and sobs. The family, torn from sleep, witnesses the great, medieval lance skewering the boy's kneecap. The beak of a swordfish, the fishermen say. They had hooked the fish, were reeling it in, when it turned and pierced through the wood and knee as cleanly as if it had aimed exactly for this place. They had to saw through the thing's beak to free him while it smashed itself against the catamaran over and over again. One amputation is rewarded by another. The Doctor must saw through flesh and break through bone by the light of a spluttering kerosene lamp. Outside the window, the entire village gathers, an agitated anthill.

Afterward, the fisherman is kept in the dispensary, battling infection, drifting between throbbing pain and dreams of the sea. His name is Seeni Banda and it is Nishan's job to feed him and accompany him to the outhouse. In later years, Seeni Banda will acquire his lifelong companion, the three-legged dog, Kalu Balla, who unlike so many of her four-legged colleagues survives the quiet morning train, losing only a leg to the Doctor's merciful knife.

* * *

For Beatrice Muriel, marriage has not been the pleasant idyll she had been brought up to expect. In an astonishingly short time, the pleasant softness of her body melts away, corroded by relentless sun, salt air, and marital dissatisfaction. Overnight she becomes gaunt, her nostrils pinched, her gaze sharp as knives. She

develops the schoolteacher's uncanny ability to detect and subdue childish mischief. Nishan must watch his friends being sent to squat at the back of the schoolroom, arms crossed to grasp opposite ears. As they walk home together, these boys say, "*Aiyo*, she has two eyes in the back of her head." And only filial devotion keeps him from replying, "*Machang*, you should see her at home."

Because marital disappointment has bred maternal ambition, Beatrice Muriel dreams of the day her son will enter university and reverse the legacy of a father who is content in daydreams and beach wanderings. Daily, she squats over the open flame, her sari pulled up between her knees, and cooks. Into the fish curry she stirs coconut milk and heady perseverance. Into the sambal, she mixes red onion, green chili, and expectation. Under her breath she mutters invocations to protect her son from *as-vaha*, the poisonous darts of envy thrown by the gaze of those with less illustrious sons.

The days of ocean diving, octopus communing, sand-covered sleep become rare. He spends all his time over books that she has gathered. Head bent over the small pool of light that falls from the lantern, he struggles to memorize English poems and mathematical equations, trace winding Sinhala hieroglyphs. His mother sits by him, her fingers quick with needle and thread. She will not go to sleep until he has finished.

* * *

And now leaving Nishan struggling over his books in the seaside village, we journey northward into the smoky realms of Colombo. Just sixty miles away but a world apart. This is the humid and pulsating capital city where the crowd spills over the pavements and onto the belching buses that swerve around bullock carts, and every language and every god of the island is in attendance over the multitudes. Here, where Galle Road reigns supreme connecting the city to the island and giving way to the quiet residential streets, here on one of those quiet and leafy lanes in the private ward of an exclusive nursing home, Nishan's wife-to-be and subsequently my mother-to-be, Visaka Jayarathna, is busy getting herself born.

Having accomplished this feat with no more than the usual traumas, she grows up in a large white house in Wellawatte, one of the more distinguished neighborhoods of Colombo. Separated from the ocean only by the railroad tracks, and a short but dignified distance away from the Wellawatte vegetable market, the house is ruled by Visaka's father, the Judge, who, Oxford-returned, insists upon a painful formalism learned in undergraduate days when he was made to feel the unbearable shame of brownness. In tribute to those frigid days, ankles are crossed, accents carefully monitored, pinkie fingers trained to point away from teacups. The family eats puddings and soups, beefsteaks and muttonchops, boiled potatoes, orange- and crimson-tinted sandwiches. They take tea at five, with sugar and milk, choose pastries off a multilayered silver tray. In December, there is Christmas cake, fruitcake, cheesecake. The dressmaker comes monthly. Visaka is chauffeured to school in her father's car and picked up at the gate after. On Tuesdays, she has elocution lessons and on Fridays she practices Bach and Beethoven for two hours on the baby grand piano.

Yet the heart of the house is an interior courtyard, built in the days of the Portuguese, who liked to keep their women sequestered in these interior gardens, full of spilling foliage, birdcall, and monkey chatter. Annoyed by this exuberance and lack of order, the Judge sends the gardener to rip and uproot. But days after these attacks, the mutilated branches send forth vines to once again wind into the embrace of the wrought iron balcony. Birds return once again to build nests in the outstretched arms of the trees. The queen of this domain, an enormous trailing jasmine, impervious to pruning, spreads a fragrant carpet of white. When the sea breeze whispers, a snowy flurry of flowers sweeps into the house so that Visaka's earliest and most tender memory is the combined scent of jasmine and sea salt.

It is into this pulsing, green space that she escapes after the boiled beef and vegetables. It is here she plays her childhood games, befriended at a distance by the birds, the geckos and squirrels. She says of her

variously prim and jungled childhood, “It was like growing up in a garden of Eden in the middle of coldhearted England.”

* * *

A photograph from this time witnesses the whole family suited and saried on the front lawn, Colombo heat perceptible only in the snaking tendrils that cling to the women’s cheeks and necks. Our mother is flanked by her two much older sisters, each beautiful in an entirely different way. One, round-faced and dark like a plump fig, succulent. The other tall, slim, and elegant, calling to mind something lunar.

Our mother, a sapling next to these hothouse beauties, poses on the edge of an ebony chair. A serious, spectacled schoolgirl in long braids and a stiff, ironed uniform, she is caught in a blur as if about to run off. Her formidable mother, Sylvia Sunethra, wears a sari in the old Victorian way, all ruffled sleeves, starch, and ramrod straight posture, her hand on the girl’s shoulder holding her down. Behind them all, her handsome brother, Ananda, debonair in a three-piece suit. In the chair sits the Judge, who despite his profound baldness looks too young to be the father of these grown children.

The photograph gives no forewarning. Yet it captures the end of my mother’s childhood, because if we enter with the certainty of history into the secret, red passageways leading to my grandfather’s heart, we see lurking within his tissue-thin arteries an amoeba-shaped blood clot that will lead him to sit up in bed six months later, clutching at his chest. He will not die of this first stroke, but some years later under the assault of successive ones and in the midst of his house-building obsession.

It is around the time of this photograph that our mother remembers the coming of Alice. Male relatives from the Judge’s ancestral village squat on the verandah waiting for the Judge. With them, a woman, face obscured behind her sari pallu. Our mother remembers the outline of a large, fair-skinned face, round as the full moon, long, she-deer eyelashes. And over the left shoulder, stretching the cheap cloth of the sari blouse, an enormous, quivering hump. “This is Alice Nona,” the men say and meticulously retrace the capillaries of familial blood that make her “our people.”

She is unmarried for obvious reasons. She has been living with her aged parents, taking care of them. But in the last year there has been trouble. The men are vague. They will not specify. The Judge thunders, “What is this nonsense? You have brought a fallen hunchback woman to my house?”

The men shift on their haunches. One says, “She can cook and also clean … only take her as a servant.”

The woman is silent, her eyes pulled earthward. But there must have been some mute appeal implicit in the twisting of her large-knuckled hands because now, Sylvia Sunethra, twelve years younger than her husband, but already becoming the iron-handed matriarch of her later years, says, “I will take her.”

The Judge is aghast. But there is something in his wife’s eye that threatens unknown violence if he does not comply. So as the men breathe sighs of relief, he says only, “Alright. She can stay and join the staff. But one problem and I will send her packing.”

The men leave, and Alice is installed somewhere between family member and servant. She sleeps on a mat outside Sylvia Sunethra’s bedroom. For three months, her face is a study in impassivity, she moves as if in a sleepwalk, and not even the crashing of a dish just behind her causes the slightest of reactions. Finally Sylvia Sunethra, annoyed beyond endurance, says, “Oh, enough with this long face all the time. Tell them to bring the child.”

The very next week, a wizened woman arrives at the gate. From within her sari folds comes a hungry,

kittenish mewing and now Alice goes about her day laughing and with a baby clinging to her breast. At night, mother and infant fall asleep, rolled together outside Sylvia Sunethra’s door, and even the Judge, afraid of the venom of his wife’s tongue, dares not question the origins of this baby that Sylvia Sunethra has decided to shelter along with its wayward mother. It is in this way that we who are not yet born acquire Alice, that beloved Quasimodo of our childhoods, and also her son, Dilshan.

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