



Island of a Thousand Mirrors

Nayomi Munaweera

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READING GROUP GUIDE

About the book:

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 she has tried so hard to avoid – a conflict that, eventually, will connect her and Yasodhara in unexpected ways.

In the tradition of *Anil's Ghost* and *The God of Small Things*, 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.

Discussion Questions

1. In this book, Munaweera takes on the point of views of both a Sinhala woman and a Tamil woman. Why do you think she made this decision? What does it mean to try and express both points of view when the subject is a civil war? Do you think she was more successful in painting one or the other of these women? Which one and why do you think so?
2. Did your reading of the Prologue change after you finished reading the book? How?



3. This is a book partly about the process of immigration. Do you think Munaweera successfully captured the pleasures and pains of immigration? Did she successfully express the divided nature of the immigrant? Did she do so in ways that reminded you of other authors or was the experience of reading this book quite different?
4. This novel has been compared to *The God of Small Things*, *Anil's Ghost*, and *The Kite Runner*. If you've read these books, do you think these are fair comparisons? Why or why not? Are there other authors/books Munaweera's style reminds you of?
5. Visaka and Ravan's love is thwarted but their children go on to fall in love. What does Munaweera seem to be saying about destiny, the acts/sins of parents, the nature of love?
6. The big white house on the seaside in Colombo figures prominently in this book. It is where Visaka grows up, where Yasodhara is brought after she is born and where the Upstairs-Downstairs wars take place. What does this house seem to represent in the book?
7. The riots in 1983 are described as a pivot point in the history of Sri Lanka and in the plot of the book. Were these scenes similar to painful moments in other parts of the world?
8. Saraswathie grows up with aspirations of becoming a teacher. Do you think what happens to her subsequently is plausible? Do you think Munaweera properly describes the process by which a normal girl might become a suicide bomber?
9. The scene of Saraswathie's rape is extremely traumatic and Munaweera has admitted that it was quite difficult for her to write. Do you think the scene was necessary in the book or should literature stay away from depicting the most painful events in a character's life? Why do you think Munaweera chose to include this scene?
10. Would you describe this book as a feminist work? If so, why?
11. Munaweera has admitted that this is a book obsessed with food. Did you find this to be true? Did the book make you interested in finding out more about Sri Lankan cuisine?
12. What does the ending message of the book seem to be?

About the author:

NAYOMI MUNAWEERA was born in Sri Lanka, and grew up in Nigeria. She emigrated with her family to the United States in her early teens, and now lives in Oakland, CA. *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* won the 2013 Commonwealth Book Prize for the Asian Region and was longlisted for the 2012 Man Asian Literary Prize. It is her first novel.



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