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**MARGINALIZATION OF SOUTH ASIANS BASED
ON THE RACE AND SKIN COLOR IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S
JASMINE AND CHITRA B. DIVAKARUNI'S
THE MISTRESS OF SPICES**

The purpose of this article is to focus on the issue of marginalization of South Asians in the United States as portrayed in two novels written by writers of Indian origin: Bharati Mukherjee's "Jasmine" and Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni's "The Mistress of Spices". It is investigated how race or skin color are the reasons for the marginalization of Indian immigrants in the United States. While "Jasmine" shows white Americans' inability to embrace the racial difference of an Indian immigrant, which may be read as a reflection of the relative newness of this ethnic group in the United States and its shifting racial classification, "The Mistress of Spices" shows that the patterns of marginalization based on skin color may be developed already in the homeland, India, and then transferred to the US and confronted with the country's racial diversity. Divakaruni's novel raises a discussion of how the appreciation of whiteness developed in the country of birth leads to the hierarchical relations between the members of the Indian diaspora, and how it affects their relations with other American minorities. In this way, it shows that marginalization based on skin color is not only the outcome of inter-ethnic encounters but it can be an internal problem of this ethnic group as well.

KEY WORDS: marginalization, race, color, South Asians.

Introduction

South Asian American fiction, similarly to other literatures created by ethnic minorities, explores the problems of marginalization based on the race or skin color. In this article it is discussed how two novels by American writers of Indian origin present this aspect of marginalization of South Asians in the United States. Both novels depict immigrants from India, and Indians will be the focus of this investigation; occasionally, the broader term South Asians will be used. Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) and Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) differ in their perspective on the issue of otherness. The former presents the problem as emerging on the American soil, in other words, it explores American prejudice towards people of a different race and frequent confusion about the exact classification of Asian Indians. The latter extends

the perspective and shows that the problem of marginalization, based on skin color in this case, may begin already in the homeland, that is, in India, before it encounters the racial and ethnic diversity of the United States. The novel suggests, therefore, that the consciousness of inferiority as well as the patterns of marginalization and dominance may be transferred to the hosting country from the country of origin and may characterize both intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic relations. The othering of Indian protagonists is conveyed differently in the novels; while *Jasmine* focuses on the negative reactions and emotions evoked by the main character's foreignness, *The Mistress of Spices* uses the trope of white physicality to imply the sense of marginalization of dark-skinned Indians.

South Asian American Racial Identity

The position of South Asians in the United States has been ambivalent, as there has been a considerable confusion about their exact race and color. Both the Census Bureau and the courts faced the problem of their appropriate classification even before 1965, the year in which began a large influx of immigrants from the Indian subcontinent. In early naturalization cases, the American courts showed inconsistency in categorizing South Asians sometimes as white, and sometimes as nonwhite (Koshy 2001). These problems were generated by the differences in skin color of South Asians ranging from black to white as well as their claims of belonging to the "Caucasian" race, i.e., the white race, even though the claimants' skin was often nonwhite. Hence, it was difficult to locate the new minority within the long established American tradition of racial division based on the black-white polarity. According to Susan Koshy, "The late appearance of South Asians on the U.S. racial landscape compounded the problem: the categories black, Indian, and white were already occupied and, more importantly, whiteness was invested with privileges and rights that were being strenuously restricted" (Koshy 2001).

Consequently, throughout the twentieth century, South Asians have been named and renamed as both "whites" and "minorities". Census Bureau classified them as Hindu, White, Other (Non-White Asiatic Indian), and Asian (Shankar 1998: 50; Koshy 2002: 35). Each of these categories was problematic. The category "Hindu" overlooked the other religious groups from the Indian subcontinent, while the majority were then Sikhs (Shankar 1998: 50). An attempt to view them as white, in 1970, was actually opposed by South Asians themselves because it deprived them of the privileges of minorities. Further, the term "Asian" did not prove a comprehensive and sufficient category. In the United States, the term "Asian" for a long time meant people from East and South East Asia: China, Japan, and Philippines, who for many years dominated and shaped the sense of "Asianness". People from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, or Nepal perceived their distinctiveness and wished to be differentiated from other Asian immigrants, which was also a manifestation of their steadily growing numbers. At present, the problem of naming remains unresolved; in recent years, the immigrants from India are placed in the rubric "Asian" and can choose nationality "Indian". For Nazli Kibria the confusion with shifting categories shows that "South Asian Americans are, in a certain sense, racially marginalized" (1998: 71), which is a position "shared by growing numbers of 'biracial' and 'multiracial' persons" (Ibid.: 71), and she prefers to call them "ambiguous

nonwhites” just to escape the limiting practice of using fixed categories to classify their race. Thus, ambiguity is an important component of the position of South Asian Americans, while the analysis of their situation influences the debates about their race and status as minorities. Koshy argues that the unstable classification of South Asians “exposes the incoherence of racial categories and the ad hoc nature of their construction over time” (2001: 1), showing race as a social construct rather than a biological given. In addition, it draws attention to the fact that political realities change, and the minority identities should be reconceptualized (Ibid.).

South Asian Americans’ complicated histories create a need for attention to their racial identification and avoidance of racial generalizations. This need is enhanced by a great diversity of the group and its “disjunct history of immigration to the United States” (Koshy 2002: 30). Koshy argues that it is necessary to show a greater concern about the histories and the divisions that immigrants bring with them to the countries of arrival: “Prevailing constructions of South Asian American identity tend to simplify the complex hierarchies of color, class and caste immigrants bring with them from their homeland by collapsing them with the historical patterns of race in their host country” (Ibid.: 37). Koshy calls for a more comprehensive exploration of the South Asian experience and understanding of the intricacies of immigrants’ histories, traditions, and cultural background rather than making generalizing statements, which would situate South Asians only within the American context. Hence, the examination of the legacy of the homeland, in this case India, and its contribution to the question of marginalization of Indians on the basis of race or skin color seems to be indispensable for a more thorough understanding of the literary representations of Indian marginalization in the United States.

The issues of racial identity and skin color of South Asians have had a particularly convoluted history. In this article, it is only possible to suggest the complexity of the problem. Various scholars have argued that South Asians display a deep concern about their skin color and the appreciation of light skin shades: “They are themselves acutely color-conscious; they see shades of brown in skin color which to any casual observer is black” (Mazumdar 1989a: 25; Mazumdar 1989b: 47). Indian culture is seen as a culture with “the longest history of colour prejudice” (Haq quoted in Maxey 2006: 539), while Indians are said to reveal an enormous awareness of skin color: “None is more aware of subtle differences of shade than the Indian” (Haq quoted in Maxey 2006: 539). Such awareness is also expressed as personal experience (Appadurai 1996: 802).

What transpires is that it is already in their homeland that Indians have developed a heightened consciousness of skin color. Skin color is one of the bases of marginalization in their native country. Consequently, a sense of inferiority derived from being a dark-skinned person, or a sense of superiority stemming from being of lighter skin are transferred to the United States and confronted with new circumstances. This confrontation generates a need to redefine immigrants’ skin color and their racial profiling, which is not simple in a country which for several centuries has practiced black-white polarization. South Asians attempt to emphasize their in-between position within the black-white spectrum, and they want to build their own identity of color.

Marginalization in *Jasmine*

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* may be read as, to some extent, an illustration of American confusion about racial difference and their problems with classification of Indian immigrants. The novel portrays marginalization of an immigrant whose foreignness is still quite untypical in the United States, and therefore difficult to embrace and comprehend, as Christina Dascalu states "throughout her new life in America, the narrator is constantly perceived as 'the Other,' as the incarnation of the colonial stereotype of the female native" (Dascalu 2007: 67). The protagonist-narrator is a young girl who has immigrated to America. *Jasmine* maintains tension between the protagonist's wish to be an American and instances of her marginalization. In the process of adaptation to American reality, Jasmine attempts to look and behave like an American, and she quickly internalizes the American set of values. Yet, her unfamiliar appearance is the basis for making her feel not only as a complete foreigner, outsider, excluded from the mainstream, but as an inferior individual as well.

Jasmine's physical features, including skin color, suffice to mark her as different. When a beggar on a New York street assaults her verbally, after it turns out that Jasmine is not going to give him any money, his target is the woman's foreign appearance: "You fucking bitch. ... you fucking foreign bitch!" (Mukherjee 1994: 139). In another confrontation, two men in a bar insult her and her partner Bud implying that she might be a foreign prostitute. They throw some "foreign" words at her, which sound like Asian and speak more of the men's adventurous past rather than their aim of finding out where Jasmine is really from: "His next words were in something foreign, but probably in Japanese or Thai or Filipino, something bar girls responded to in places where he'd spent his rifle-toting youth" (Ibid.: 201). For the two men Jasmine is "Asian" or "Oriental", an exotic creature from a distant, backward continent, characterized by sensuality and submissiveness. Their reaction resembles that of Half-Face, the carrier of illegal immigrants, who rapes Jasmine upon her arrival in America. The woman's feeble attempts to explain some details of her past bear no interest for Half-Face, for him Jasmine is just from Asia, which he sees as an uncivilized and barbaric land: "I been to Asia and it's the armpit of the universe" (Ibid.: 112). Furthermore, the high status of Bud, a local banker, among the farmers of the county, is probably the reason why they suppress any expressions of racism and rejection: "In Baden, the farmers *are afraid to suggest I'm different*. ... In a pinch, they'll admit that I might look a little different, that I'm a 'dark-haired girl' in a naturally blond country. I have a 'darkish complexion' (in India, I'm 'wheatish'), as though I might be Greek from one parent" (Ibid.: 33)¹. In public, the farmers tone down their statements about Jasmine's different appearance, out of caution, probably motivated by their dependence on the banker's decision about the loans. Therefore, the farmers pretend not to see the woman's exoticism, her "difference". Instead, they opt for familiar terms and suggest her European origin implying a link with their European roots. However, Jasmine eventually learns that she and Bud are called

¹ Italicized by the author of the article.

“the Odd Couple” (Ibid.: 218). White Iowans’ racism is not in the open but concealed under their polite appreciation and consumption of Indian food, which Jasmine prepares for them. As one may suspect, she is considered odd for her foreign looks, while Bud for his disability (he is in a wheelchair after a murder attempt) and perhaps for his acceptance of Jasmine, his eager embrace of her exoticism, which makes him divorce his wife and accept the new lover under his roof.

In order to imply marginalization based on racial features, Mukherjee resorts to the description of reactions and emotions rather than emphasizing the details of the protagonist’s physical appearance. Americans perceive Jasmine as different, but she does not underline any element of her looks as overwhelmingly different. It is the stereotypes her foreignness releases that are most important from her perspective. These are the stereotypes attached to Eastern femininity, such as sexuality, fertility, and submissiveness. The Orientalizing gaze of Americans constantly locates Jasmine in an inferior position because of the perception of her racial difference. The young woman has experienced marginalization before, in her homeland, but on different grounds: her gender was the source of oppression. Jasmine’s mother tried to strangle her right after her birth, devastated on seeing another daughter, who for the family would mean financial burden, loans, or simply another “unhappy life” if there were no financial means to support her. Jasmine understands her mother’s motives; she knows the woman wanted only to “spare her the pain of a dowryless bride” (Ibid.: 40). Yet, skin color was never a problem for her in India, in fact, as the protagonist admits, she was perceived as “wheatish”, in other words, she possessed a lighter, privileged shade of skin. As a result, racism on the basis of appearance, and especially the negative reactions to her “darkish” skin, with which she is confronted in the United States, are new for her and quite startling.

Marginalization in *The Mistress of Spices*

Chitra Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* gives a different perspective on the question of racial marginalization of Indians in the United States, because it embraces the beliefs and practices of the native country. The presentation of India, in a very similar vein as in *Jasmine*, brings up the issue of gender as a source of oppression (Mannur 2010: 89-101; Daphne 2007); yet, at the same time skin color remains a powerful factor. Consequently, it is already the moment of the protagonist’s birth that is important. The first viewing of a newborn is an attempt to assess the prospects for a comfortable and successful life of the child. For Tilo’s parents this brings disappointment. The girl is another daughter in the family and, what is even worse, dark-skinned: “my parents’ faces were heavy with fallen hope at another girlchild, and this one coloured like mud” (Divakaruni 2005: 7). The fortune-teller’s reaction on seeing the baby is equally disheartening, he “shook his head sorrowfully at [the girl’s] father” (Ibid.: 7). As in *Jasmine*, the shadow of death is hanging over the protagonist: “Wrap her in old cloth, lay her face down on the floor. What does she bring to the family except a dowry debt” (Ibid.: 7). Dark skin has a significant influence on the girl’s life. She describes herself as a “dark girl left to wander the village unattended” (Ibid.: 8), which means that Tilo is conscious of the darker shade of her skin even in a village among her own people. She also feels a certain lack of

proper care, attention, and concern that signifies her worthlessness in the eyes of others, and which results in her sense of estrangement from the family and the rest of the village inhabitants. Thus, the consciousness of her dark skin is inseparably linked to the feeling of inferiority, and this legacy of India is eventually transferred to the United States, when the protagonist settles down in Oakland, California.

The appreciation of whiteness in India is a complex phenomenon and has been interpreted mainly as a result of two events in the history of the Indian subcontinent: Aryan and British invasion. The Aryan invasion introduced a division between Aryan and non-Aryan races in the form of the caste system. In this way, the fair-skinned people were separated from the dark-skinned, and the caste system became a mechanism to enforce Aryan superiority over the conquered nation. Aryans tried to prevent intermixing of castes and possibly races; thus, they advocated marriages within one caste (Bhattacharya 2011: 126), consequently maintaining the hierarchy between castes or classes of society. Sucheta Mazumdar regards the Aryan origin myth as the basis of racist attitudes: "South Asians, regardless of national origin on the subcontinent, cling to a mythography which holds that the elite (upper caste/class) are 'Aryan' and by extension 'Caucasian'" (1989b: 47), while "Caucasian" means, by extension, "white". She attributes South Asian racist attitudes to "the class fear of being overwhelmed by the dark-skinned working people that haunts upper caste Hindus. They have long sought to use notions of 'purity of blood' and 'Caucasian features' to exercise dominance over the majority of the population whom they have dubbed the 'non-Aryan' Untouchables" (Ibid.: 51).

The British colonization strengthened the value of whiteness even further. White skin color was inseparably linked to the superiority of the colonizer, the privileges the native inhabitants of India did not have in the colonial times (Bhattacharya 2011: 120). As a result, whiteness was a respected and desired commodity. Today, lighter skin among South Asians is associated with better prospects and opportunities, and this is understood as colorism, i.e., a phenomenon distinct from racism (Ibid.: 123-4). Remnants of this kind of thinking have endured and can be found, for example, in the preference for the lighter colored females when arranging marriages (Ibid.: 127). A look at the popular press reveals that contemporary India still struggles with racist attitudes as well as colorism. The attitudes to Indians from the North, who have different physical features are often marked by prejudice; moreover, the awareness of color and the notion of superiority derived from the fact of possessing skin of a lighter-shade are widespread.²

Divakaruni's novel uses the trope of white physicality to underline the hierarchy between colors, in other words, to suggest the Indian belief in the superiority of light-skinned people and show the experience of marginalization of individuals whose skin is of a darker shade. Exploring the intra-ethnic relations *The Mistress of Spices* indicates

² Some titles from the press which register these attitudes are "Fair Factor: the Whiter, the Better" (Islam *et al.* 2006), "Racism, Our Dirty Secret" (Hazra 2014), "Our True Colors" (Dasgupta 2009). Moreover, the British media record the controversy about, e.g., the whitening creams (both for women and for men) and especially about the advertisements of the products, which equate fairness with beauty or openly refer to the higher chances of employment or promotion linked to the lighter shade of skin (as in the article in *The Guardian* "India's Unfair Obsession with Lighter Skin", Rajesh 2013). See also the discussion in Bhattacharya 2011: 120-122.

the importance of the difference in color tones between the Indian immigrants. This difference is represented as a significant factor structuring their relations, which in the consequence are hierarchical. Furthermore, the lighter skin color is often accompanied by a higher position in society or a better financial status: these two qualities are shown as complementary. Accordingly, the visit of rich Indians in Tilo's store reveals the hierarchies that exist among people of one nation even though they are outside their homeland, in completely new circumstances. The rich Indians' fair skin is accompanied by wealth and the air of dominance. Only a brief, though important comment about the rich Indians' physical appearance is made: their feet are "almost white" (Ibid.: 75). The main focus is on their wealth: they "descend from hills that twinkle brighter than stars" (Ibid.: 75), which means that they live in privileged areas; chauffeurs drive their cars with "gold-handled" doors; their feet are in gold sandals, and their attitude towards her is condescending: "The rich Indians look at me with heavy eyes that are almost no colour at all" (Ibid.: 76). There is a sharp contrast not only between the wealth of rich Indians and the modest living of Tilo, a spice store keeper, but also between their skin colors: Tilo's dark skin is set against the "almost white" skin of rich Indians, who feel exceptional and do not hide their disdain towards dark-skinned people from a lower class.

Divakaruni shows that, especially for the first generation of Indian immigrants, color matters also in relations to the other minorities. The first-generation immigrants transfer to the country of arrival a deep sense of hierarchies ingrained in the structure of Indian society and hence in Indian consciousness. These inequalities are results of the caste system and British colonialism. Holding the minority status in the United States, Indian immigrants that are portrayed in the novel sometimes respond by the marginalization of other minorities, especially those whose skin color is similar or darker, and whose status is perceived as lower in American society. However, the members of the second generation do not hold such prejudice but show how comfortable they are in multi-ethnic American society. The case of Geeta and her family illustrates this point.

When Geeta, a young Indian woman raised in the United States, informs her parents that she has already found a man whom she wants to marry, they are shattered to hear that she has decided to go against their will and against the tradition of the arranged marriage. They cling to a hope that the man is at least white, in which case the marriage would not be a transgression but actually a way to move up on the social ladder. Yet, when Geeta reveals that the man is a Chicano, she crushes the family's expectations for an appropriate husband. Consequently, her grandfather scolds her: "You are losing your caste and putting blackest *kali* on our ancestors' faces to marry a man who is not even a sahib, whose people are slum criminals and illegals" (Ibid.: 89). Divakaruni makes here a point about the lasting importance of caste for immigrants; despite their dislocation and attempts to build a new life in the United States, they continue to cherish beliefs and values from their homeland. Hence, they hold to the idea that the purity of the caste should be maintained. An exception could be made if the groom were a "sahib", i.e., a white person, as the term brings associations of British masters in colonial India. Furthermore, deep reservations about Hispanics reveal the first generation's disregard of non-white ethnicities and acceptance of negative stereotypes about other minorities,

especially if these minorities are of similar skin color. Rajagopal argues that South Asians wish to “distance themselves from blacks and Hispanics” (Rajagopal quoted in Morning 2001: 65), in other words, they strive to distance themselves from people who are similar in color, but whose status is seen as much lower than that of the Indian minority. Mazumdar argues that in the United States “[South Asians] find it necessary to distinguish themselves from all other ethnic groups. Since their skin color automatically sets them apart from the white majority, efforts are focused on differentiating themselves from other minorities” (1989b: 51). All that can be read as a desire toward whiteness and the status connected with the white majority. This viewpoint, in the novel characteristic of the first generation immigrants, is in sharp contrast to the attitude of those born in the US. Thus, Geeta, who represents the second generation, feels no longer obliged to follow the Indian customs, which she considers to be the traditions of her parents’ homeland. Moreover, the divisions generated by the caste affiliation or skin color are no longer valid for her.

Finally, the Indian sense of inferiority and marginalization based on skin color is evident from the protagonist’s appreciative attitude towards whiteness. For a man outside of her culture and of different appearance (Raven, a “lonely American”, looks white to Tilo and other Indians), she decides to break the Mistress’s rules of conduct, that is, never falling in love with a man and never helping a non-Indian person. Thus, she consents to dire consequences, which will befall her because of the disobedience. Tilo immediately strikes a bond with Raven, the only man who is impervious to her magical powers of mind-reading (Divakaruni 2005: 71). The inability to see his thoughts fascinates the woman and is one of the reasons of his attractiveness. Yet, a frequent Indian client, Haroun, points to another factor which raises the American’s appeal, that is, his white skin. Haroun voices his concern as well as criticism, when he sees Tilo’s visitor. He criticizes her carelessness in letting unknown visitors in after dark and deplors the way the Mistress is treating the white visitor and her unwillingness to listen to Haroun’s warnings: “I’m only a *kala admi* after all, not a white like *him*” (Ibid.: 112). Haroun immediately points to the difference in skin color. Calling himself “*kala admi*”, which means “black man”, he locates himself in an inferior position. Accordingly, he accuses Tilo of showing more respect for the white man than to a member of the Indian community. It is an important motif in the novel, for even though Tilo prefers to emphasize the special bond she has with the “lonely American”, which she attributes mainly to the fact that she cannot read his mind, the way she sees Raven does indeed suggest her appreciation for the white skin.

Tilo pays attention to every detail of Raven’s appearance. She scrutinizes him and on the basis of her observations evaluates his class and race belonging. His elegant clothes, the “expensiveness” of which she can tell (Ibid.: 68), suggest his higher status and financial means. She also examines his posture and face, notices dark hair and eyes. Everything about the “lonely American” tells her that he is white. The value of superficial judgment based only on the inspection of appearance is later defied: Raven turns out to be biracial, his mother was a Native American. Before Tilo learns about Raven’s mixed origin, her fascination and infatuation are manifested in her imaginings of his “ivory”

body (Ibid.: 73). Tilo's descriptions of Raven's white skin are idealistic, she notices his beautiful feet with "the soles pale ivory" (Ibid.: 151), and his arm with "skeins of lapis lazuli running under the skin" (Ibid.: 110). When she tries to differentiate between different hues of white as she pictures them in her mind, her descriptions always employ very positive terms: "Under his shirt his skin must be golden as lamplight" (Ibid.: 113), in another image she envisions his chest as "smooth as the sunwarm whitewood we used on the island to carve amulets" (Ibid.: 113). Later, interestingly, when Tilo learns about Raven's mixed origin, she uses different terms to describe his skin. His skin reveals even more golden hues to Tilo: his hand is "gleaming goldbrown" (Ibid.: 164). Influenced by the information of Raven's roots, she pictures his skin as darker, but still with a noble, refined hue of gold. Tilo's attitude is full of admiration for Raven's physicality, especially for the whiteness of his skin. The appreciation of whiteness is not a product of her confrontation with American reality: it has already been instilled in her in India. The novel seems to emphasize this fact by portraying Tilo as a Mistress who has a very limited contact with the external world. Being confined to her spice store and with an obligation to serve only the Indian community, she is not really exposed to the American lifestyle or set of values until she meets Raven.

Apart from exploring inequalities and tensions resulting from the white-black polarity between the Indian immigrants and in their confrontation with members of other ethnic groups in America, Divakaruni's novel works towards building the consciousness of the Indian diaspora racial uniqueness. It attempts to locate Indians within the American racial and ethnic diversity somewhere between the black-white racial polarity. Therefore, even though it acknowledges the range of colors of Indian skin, portraying Tilo as very dark while rich Indians as almost white, it establishes Indian distinctiveness as "brownness". The protagonist frequently refers to the brown color when she describes Indians. She speaks of immigrants from the Indian continent as "a brown people who come from elsewhere, to whom real Americans might say *Why?*" (Ibid.: 5). In a vision that she has of Mohan, an Indian store keeper who is attacked and severely beaten, she notices the sharp contrast between the whiteness of bandages and Indian skin: "The white of his bandages blends with the white of the hospital pillow. Only his skin stands out in patches, brown like mine. Like mine, Indian skin" (Ibid.: 168). It is worth noting that although Tilo is aware of the darkness of her skin, she never refers to herself as black; it is always brownness that is emphasized. It is particularly conspicuous when the Mistress leaves the confines of her Spice Bazaar and visits a young woman in need, Geeta. She decides not to wear the traditional sari but chooses Western clothes, which are, significantly, all brown: "I pull on my no-nonsense pants and polyester top, button my nondescript brown coat all the way to my calves. I lace my sturdy brown shoes, heft my brown umbrella in readiness. This new-clothed self, I and not-I, is woven of strands of brownness" (Ibid.: 131). Stripped of her traditional sari and, quite unlike in her store, wearing shoes, she wants to look plain in the streets of Oakland, at the same time manifesting her distinctiveness as a member of the Indian diaspora.

Concluding Remarks

The two novels present two different aspects of Indian marginalization in the United States. *Jasmine*, which is an earlier novel, is judgmental of American attitudes to immigrants from the Indian subcontinent, drawing attention to the fact that Indian racial foreignness may be problematic and may result in the outbursts of hostility and often humiliating treatment of this relatively new ethnic group. *The Mistress of Spices* locates the problem of marginalization based on skin color in the beliefs and practices that immigrants bring over from their homeland, India, which stem from ancient racial and caste divisions, as well as from the hierarchies built by the colonial past. In this novel the high value of whiteness, and hence the aspiration towards whiteness, is emphasized. Through the repetitive reference to the “brownness” of Indian skin, the narrative also builds the consciousness of the racial uniqueness of the Indian diaspora by distancing from the American black-white racial polarity.

These two novels, which are eight years apart, may be interpreted as illustrations of different problems that affected South Asians in the United States within this time: from attempts to come to terms with the problem of their racial identification to possibly their relatively settled position in American society but with a need to highlight their uniqueness, and valorize it positively against the other nonwhite ethnic groups, at the same time acknowledging the internal problems of the South Asian diaspora.

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