

**Transgenerational Trauma and Postcolonial Identity in
Manhattan Music by Meena Alexander**

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Paper Received on 20-03-2026, Accepted on 27-05-2026
Published on 28-05-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.02.591

Abstract

This paper examines Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music* (1997) as a literary text that negotiates transgenerational trauma alongside the complexities of postcolonial identity formation. Drawing upon trauma theory, postcolonial criticism, and diaspora studies, the paper argues that Alexander's novel constructs a layered narrative in which the inherited wounds of colonial displacement converge with the psychic dislocations of immigrant experience in contemporary America. Through close textual analysis supported by theoretical frameworks drawn from Cathy Caruth, Homi K. Bhabha, Avtar Brah, and Paul Gilroy, the paper investigates how Alexander's protagonist, Sandhya, embodies a condition of chronic temporal rupture—simultaneously haunted by the submerged histories of South Asian colonialism and estranged within the multicultural anxieties of post-1980s New York. The paper further explores Alexander's use of fragmented narrative form, hybridity, and the metaphoric power of music as structural devices that enact rather than merely describe psychic woundedness. The analysis situates *Manhattan Music* within the broader tradition of South Asian diasporic literature while attending to its singular contribution to the literary representation of traumatic inheritance. Ultimately, this paper contends that the novel stages a politics of memory wherein trauma becomes not simply a wound to be mourned but a resource for constructing a mobile, contingent postcolonial self.

Keywords: transgenerational trauma, postcolonial identity, diaspora, Meena Alexander, *Manhattan Music*, hybridity, memory, South Asian literature

1. Introduction

Meena Alexander occupies a distinctive position in the landscape of contemporary South Asian diasporic writing. Born in Allahabad, raised partly in Sudan, educated in Khartoum and Nottingham, and long resident in New York, Alexander's biography itself reads as an archive of colonial and postcolonial displacements. Her creative work—poetry, memoir, fiction—consistently stages the problem of self-formation under conditions of radical geographic and cultural dislocation. *Manhattan Music* (1997), her second novel, is perhaps her most sustained engagement with these questions, weaving together the histories of partition, colonial violence, and immigrant alienation into a narrative whose formal fragmentation mirrors its thematic concerns.

The novel follows Sandhya, a South Asian woman living in Manhattan, whose present-tense experiences of racial profiling, romantic entanglement, and artistic aspiration are perpetually interrupted by memories—her own, her mother's, and those encoded in the cultural fabric of South Asian history. The traumatic past does not remain in the past; it irrupts, unbidden and insistent, into the ordinary moments of Sandhya's New York life. This temporal structure, whereby the historical violence of colonialism resurfaces in the psychic life of a postcolonial subject generations removed from that violence, is precisely what the theoretical framework of transgenerational trauma is designed to address.

The concept of transgenerational trauma—sometimes called intergenerational or secondary trauma—posits that the psychic effects of extreme historical violence can be transmitted across generations, shaping the emotional and psychological lives of those who did not directly experience the originating events (Kellermann 256). Developed primarily in clinical contexts through the study of Holocaust survivors' children and grandchildren, the concept has been productively extended by literary scholars and postcolonial critics to theorize the enduring psychological legacies of slavery, colonialism, partition, and other forms of systemic historical violence (Craps 4). Alexander's novel provides a rich literary case study for this theoretical intersection, staging the convergence of colonial memory and immigrant experience with extraordinary formal self-consciousness.

This paper proceeds through several stages of analysis. The first section situates *Manhattan Music* within the theoretical frameworks of transgenerational trauma and postcolonial identity, establishing the critical vocabulary that will inform subsequent readings of the text. The second section examines how colonial memory is encoded in the novel's narrative structure and in Sandhya's psychological life. The third section explores the construction of a diasporic postcolonial identity through

hybridity and the negotiation of belonging. The fourth section turns to the novel's titular metaphor of music as a formal strategy for representing the complex temporality of traumatic memory. A final section considers the political stakes of Alexander's literary project, arguing that the novel transforms trauma from a site of paralysis into a resource for contingent self-making.

2. Transgenerational Trauma and Postcolonial Theory: A Theoretical Framework

The theoretical purchase of transgenerational trauma for postcolonial literary analysis depends upon recognizing the structural parallels between clinical accounts of traumatic transmission and the historical conditions of colonial violence. Trauma theory, as developed by Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), posits that traumatic events cannot be fully assimilated at the moment of their occurrence. They return, rather, in flashbacks, nightmares, and intrusive memories that testify to the impossibility of their integration into normal consciousness. For Caruth, trauma is characterized by its belatedness: "it is not simply, that is, a symptom of the unconscious, but of history itself" (Caruth 5). The traumatic event speaks through the survivor not as recovered memory but as compulsive repetition.

This account of trauma as historical excess—as something that exceeds the cognitive capacity of the individual to process—maps productively onto the condition of postcolonial subjects whose lives are shaped by historical violences they did not directly experience. The partition of India, the violence of British colonial rule, the disruption of cultural continuities that colonialism enacted: these are events whose effects persisted long after formal independence, shaping the psychological inheritance of subsequent generations. Stef Craps, in *Postcolonial Witnessing* (2013), has argued that mainstream trauma theory has been insufficiently attentive to the specifically collective and historical character of colonial trauma, which is not reducible to the individual psychic event but involves the transmission of wound through culture, community, and familial structure (Craps 30).

The concept of postcolonial identity, as theorized by Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), provides a complementary framework. For Bhabha, postcolonial subjects inhabit a "third space" that is neither fully assimilated to colonial culture nor capable of returning to some pristine pre-colonial identity. This liminal position is the site of hybridity—the production of new cultural forms that are marked by the encounter between colonizer and colonized. Importantly, Bhabha insists that hybridity is not simply mixture or synthesis but a site of ambivalence, negotiation, and potential subversion. The postcolonial hybrid subject does not

merely blend cultures; she inhabits the gap between them, and it is in this gap that agency becomes possible (Bhabha 37).

Avtar Brah's concept of "diaspora space" further complicates the picture by attending to the material conditions of diasporic existence. In *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996), Brah distinguishes between the diaspora as historical experience and "diaspora space" as the conceptual field within which the intersecting dynamics of migration, economic displacement, and cultural maintenance are negotiated. Her concept of "homing desire"—the longing for a home that is not necessarily a desire to return to an actual place of origin but rather the construction of an imagined home—is particularly relevant to Alexander's novel, in which Sandhya's relationship to India is mediated through memory, myth, and the fragmentary testimonies of her elders (Brah 192).

Paul Gilroy's theorization of the "Black Atlantic" as a counter-culture of modernity shaped by the traumatic history of the Middle Passage offers another productive parallel for South Asian diasporic experience. Gilroy argues that the cultures produced by the African diaspora must be understood as fundamentally shaped by their traumatic origins, and that the musical forms central to those cultures—blues, jazz, soul—carry the memory of that trauma in their very form and structure (Gilroy 37). While Alexander's context differs significantly from Gilroy's, his insistence on the constitutive role of traumatic history in the formation of diasporic cultural identity, and on music as a particularly powerful medium for the transmission and processing of that history, resonates strongly with Alexander's project in *Manhattan Music*.

3. Colonial Memory and Psychic Rupture in *Manhattan Music*

3.1 The Structure of Traumatic Interruption

Alexander's narrative technique in *Manhattan Music* enacts the structure of traumatic memory at the level of form. The novel's chronology is deliberately fractured, moving between Sandhya's present-tense New York life and a series of intrusive memories that belong not only to her personal history but to the collective history of South Asian partition and colonial displacement. These memory sequences are not clearly demarcated from the present-tense narrative; they erupt without warning, in the middle of scenes, or in the liminal space between sleep and waking. This formal strategy mirrors the clinical phenomenology of traumatic intrusion, in which past events force themselves into present consciousness without regard for the subject's readiness or desire.

The violence encoded in Sandhya's memory is not, however, primarily that which she herself has experienced. Her most charged memories are of events narrated

to her by her mother and grandmother—stories of the partition, of villages burned, of women violated, of the sudden erasure of familiar worlds. These inherited memories function as what Marianne Hirsch has termed "postmemory"—a mode of remembering in which "the connection to the past is actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch 107). Sandhya did not experience partition; she remembers it through her mother's body, her grandmother's silence, and the gaps and ruptures in family narrative that mark the locations of unspeakable trauma.

This mediated quality of Sandhya's traumatic inheritance is central to Alexander's literary project. The novel refuses to grant Sandhya access to the originary traumatic event—she cannot recover or possess the partition as a lived memory—but it equally refuses to allow her to escape it. She is constituted by a wound she did not receive, shaped by a history she did not live through. This paradox—of being determined by an event one cannot claim as one's own—is precisely the condition of transgenerational trauma, and Alexander renders it with considerable psychological and formal sophistication.

3.2 The Body as Archive of Colonial History

One of the most distinctive features of Alexander's representation of transgenerational trauma is her insistence on the body as the primary site at which historical violence is stored and transmitted. Sandhya's somatic symptoms—recurring headaches, episodes of dissociation, a chronic sense of physical fragility—are presented not as individual psychological symptoms but as bodily inscriptions of collective historical trauma. The body becomes, in Alexander's text, an archive of colonial history, carrying the traces of violence that language has been unable or unwilling to transmit.

This somatic dimension of traumatic inheritance is theorized by Mark Wolynn in *It Didn't Start with You* (2016), who argues that unresolved trauma manifests in the bodies of descendants as a form of biological and psychological inheritance. While Alexander's novel predates this clinical literature, it anticipates its central insight: that trauma is not simply a matter of psychological representation but involves the transmission of affect, bodily disposition, and physiological reactivity across generations (Wolynn 23). Sandhya's body is, in this sense, not her own; it is a site where the violence done to her ancestors continues to speak.

Alexander's attention to the body is also inflected by a specifically gendered analysis of colonial violence. The novel is acutely aware that the bodies of South Asian women occupied a particular position within both colonial power and anti-colonial nationalism—simultaneously objectified by colonial discourse, idealized as

repositories of national culture, and subjected to spectacular violence during partition. Sandhya's inheritance of this gendered traumatic history means that her body is experienced not only as a site of personal identity but as a charged political object, inscribed by histories that exceed her individual life.

4. Constructing Postcolonial Identity in the Diaspora

4.1 Hybridity, Alienation, and the Third Space

Sandhya's identity in *Manhattan Music* is constructed across multiple axes of difference—between Indian and American, between the colonial past and the postcolonial present, between her mother's culture and the multicultural dissonances of New York. She inhabits, in Bhabha's sense, a third space that is not reducible to any single cultural location. This hybridity is not, however, experienced as liberation or creative multiplicity; it is experienced, at least initially, as a condition of chronic alienation. Sandhya does not belong fully to any of the cultural worlds that claim her, and this condition of non-belonging is one of the novel's central preoccupations.

Alexander is careful to distinguish Sandhya's experience of New York multiculturalism from any celebratory account of diversity as simple coexistence. The novel's New York is a city of radical difference and persistent hierarchy, in which Sandhya's South Asian body is subject to racialized surveillance, casual racism, and the persistent assumption of foreignness. Her postcolonial identity is formed not simply through the positive assertion of cultural heritage but through repeated encounters with structures of power that position her as other, as immigrant, as perpetually provisional American.

This experience of racialized othering in the American context produces a secondary layer of traumatic experience that compounds rather than displaces the inherited colonial wound. Sandhya must negotiate not only the psychic legacy of South Asian colonial history but also the contemporary racism of the American city. Alexander thus refuses to allow postcolonial identity to be reducible to a single axis of historical oppression; her novel insists on the intersectional character of Sandhya's position, shaped simultaneously by colonial history, gender, and the racial hierarchies of American society.

4.2 Language, Silence, and the Limits of Expression

A recurrent concern in *Manhattan Music* is the problem of linguistic expression under conditions of traumatic inheritance. Sandhya struggles to find language adequate to her experience—experience that is itself constituted by the inadequacy of language to capture what colonial violence and displacement have wrought. This is not simply a personal failing; it reflects the structural condition of

trauma, which, as Caruth argues, is defined by its resistance to narrative assimilation. The traumatic event is, by definition, that which cannot be fully told.

Alexander's attention to the limits of language is complicated by the question of which language is at issue. English—the language of the novel, and the language in which Sandhya must conduct her New York life—is the language of the colonizer, carrying within it the history of colonial power that has shaped Sandhya's inheritance. To speak English is to inhabit, however partially and resistingly, the linguistic structure of colonial modernity. The languages of Sandhya's family—Hindi, Malayalam, the regional idioms of South Asian domestic life—are present in the novel as fragments, as sounds and cadences that intrude into the English text, performing the impossibility of complete linguistic assimilation.

This linguistic situation produces what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has termed the "double bind" of postcolonial writing in English: the necessity of using the colonizer's language while remaining critically aware of that language's complicity with colonial power (Spivak 62). Alexander navigates this bind through formal strategies—the intrusion of non-English phrases, the disruption of smooth English syntax, the deployment of imagery drawn from South Asian cultural traditions—that mark the English text as inhabited and haunted by other linguistic worlds.

5. Music as Metaphor: Form, Memory, and Temporal Rupture

5.1 The Structural Role of Music

The title of Alexander's novel is not merely descriptive; it is programmatic. *Manhattan Music* announces the centrality of music as both thematic concern and formal principle. Throughout the novel, music functions as a medium for the transmission of traumatic memory—a form of cultural inheritance that bypasses the explicit narratives of the past and accesses the affective residue of historical experience. Sandhya is surrounded by music: the classical Indian music of her childhood, the jazz and blues of New York's streets and bars, the hybrid forms that emerge from the encounter between these traditions.

Music's particular relevance to the representation of transgenerational trauma derives from its temporal structure. Unlike narrative, which moves sequentially from past to present to future, music is fundamentally recursive—it returns, repeats, varies, and transforms. The musical phrase does not simply disappear once played; it resonates, echoes, and recurs in subsequent passages. This structure mirrors the temporal character of traumatic memory, which similarly refuses linear progression and insists on repetition and return. In making music the organizing metaphor of her

novel, Alexander aligns the formal structure of the text with the psychic structure of the traumatic experience it represents.

Paul Gilroy's account of music as a medium for the transmission of historical trauma in the African diaspora context is directly relevant here. Gilroy argues that the blues and jazz carry the memory of the Middle Passage not through explicit lyrical representation but through their formal qualities—their structures of call and response, their minor keys, their temporal expansions and contractions. Music transmits affect as well as content; it communicates the emotional texture of historical experience in ways that exceed propositional language (Gilroy 74). Alexander's novel makes an analogous claim for the music of the South Asian diaspora: that it carries the traces of colonial history in its form as well as its content.

5.2 Indian Classical Music and Colonial Memory

The figure of Indian classical music in *Manhattan Music* is particularly charged, given the historical relationship between classical musical traditions and the politics of colonial and postcolonial cultural identity. British colonialism subjected Indian classical music to a complex process of both denigration—as primitive or sensual—and selective valorization—as evidence of a noble ancient civilization deserving of preservation. The postcolonial recovery of classical musical traditions involved not simply the continuation of pre-colonial forms but their transformation through the encounter with colonial power and the demands of nationalist cultural politics.

Sandhya's relationship to Indian classical music is thus never simply personal or aesthetic; it is always already entangled with these historical and political dynamics. When she listens to or performs classical music, she is not simply experiencing beauty; she is participating in a practice that carries the memory of colonial contestation and postcolonial recovery. The music functions as what Jan Assmann has called "cultural memory"—a form of collective remembrance encoded in cultural practice that connects the present to a past that precedes any living individual's experience (Assmann 38).

The encounter between Indian classical music and the jazz and blues of New York's diasporic soundscape is one of the novel's most generative tensions. Sandhya moves between these musical worlds, and in doing so, she performs the hybrid cultural negotiation that constitutes her postcolonial identity. Neither tradition can fully contain her; both make claims upon her. The music of Manhattan—fragmented, polyphonic, marked by the traumatic histories of multiple diasporic communities—becomes the sonic figure for Sandhya's own condition of traumatic hybridity.

6. The Politics of Traumatic Memory: Agency and Resistance

6.1 Trauma as Resource

A central interpretive question for any reading of traumatic narrative is whether trauma is represented primarily as a condition of victimhood and paralysis or as a resource for resistance and agency. Alexander's novel is alert to this question, and its answer is nuanced. Sandhya's transgenerational traumatic inheritance is not romanticized or aestheticized; it is presented as genuinely disabling—as a source of psychic fragmentation, somatic distress, and social alienation. The novel does not pretend that trauma is redemptive or that the wound of colonial history is a badge of honor.

At the same time, Alexander refuses a purely victimological account of postcolonial trauma. Sandhya's engagement with her traumatic inheritance is not passive; she is a figure who actively works through the meanings of the past, seeking to understand and articulate the structures of historical violence that have shaped her. This work of understanding is itself presented as a form of agency—not the agency of escaping or overcoming the past, but the agency of refusing to be unconsciously determined by it. The difference between being haunted by trauma and working through it is, in Alexander's representation, the difference between passive repetition and active engagement with the structures of historical memory.

Michael Rothberg's concept of "multidirectional memory" is relevant here. Rothberg argues that traumatic memories do not necessarily compete with one another in a zero-sum struggle for recognition; they can, in productive encounters, illuminate and amplify one another (Rothberg 5). Sandhya's experience of racialized othering in New York brings her into contact with the traumatic histories of other communities—African Americans, Caribbean immigrants, other South Asian and East Asian Americans—whose experiences resonate with but do not simply replicate her own. This multidirectional engagement with traumatic history is presented in the novel as a potential basis for diasporic solidarity and political consciousness.

6.2 Writing as Witness

Alexander's project in *Manhattan Music* can also be understood as an act of literary witnessing—an attempt to bear testimony to traumatic experiences that have resisted other forms of representation. Dori Laub's account of testimony, developed in the context of Holocaust survivor narrative, argues that the traumatic event requires a witness in order to be fully acknowledged; without the presence of a receiving consciousness, the traumatic memory cannot be adequately processed (Laub 57). Literature, in this account, functions as a surrogate witness—a space in which

traumatic experience can be narrated to an attentive reader, and in which the process of acknowledgment and recognition can occur.

For postcolonial traumatic memory, the problem of witnessing is particularly acute. Colonial history is routinely unacknowledged, minimized, or actively suppressed in public discourse—both in the former colonial metropolises and in the postcolonial nations whose histories were shaped by colonial violence. The traumatic memories that circulate within diasporic communities are memories of events that have not received adequate public recognition; they are, in an important sense, unwitnessed memories. Alexander's novel intervenes in this situation by giving literary form to traumatic inheritances that have not found adequate expression in other public discourses.

This witnessing function of the novel is connected to Alexander's broader project as a postcolonial intellectual committed to making visible the histories that colonial and neocolonial power have suppressed. Her memoir *Fault Lines* (1993), which precedes *Manhattan Music*, explicitly addresses the problem of writing the self under conditions of colonial violence and postcolonial displacement. *Manhattan Music* extends this project into the domain of fiction, using the resources of the novel form—its capacity for interiority, its temporal flexibility, its ability to stage the encounter between individual consciousness and historical structure—to bear witness to the complex inheritances of colonial trauma.

7. *Manhattan Music* in the South Asian Diasporic Literary Tradition

Situating *Manhattan Music* within the broader tradition of South Asian diasporic literature reveals both Alexander's debts to her predecessors and the singular quality of her contribution. The South Asian diasporic novel in English has, since at least Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), been preoccupied with the relationship between personal and collective history, between the individual consciousness and the large-scale historical forces—partition, colonialism, postcolonial nationalism—that have shaped the South Asian world. Rushdie's magical realism, with its playful engagement with history and myth, established one model for the postcolonial novel's negotiation of traumatic historical memory.

Alexander's approach differs significantly from Rushdie's exuberant and at times ludic historicism. Where Rushdie tends toward epic scope and a certain ironic distance from the traumatic events he represents, Alexander's mode is intimate, lyric, and undefended. *Manhattan Music* is less a novel of history than a novel of the psychic life of history—of the way historical forces penetrate and reshape individual consciousness. In this respect, Alexander is closer to the tradition of women's diasporic writing represented by figures such as Bharati Mukherjee, whose novel

Jasmine (1989) similarly explores the psychic costs of immigration and cultural displacement for South Asian women in America, though Mukherjee's more assimilationist ideology distinguishes her project significantly from Alexander's.

Alexander's most distinctive contribution to the South Asian diasporic literary tradition lies in her explicit theorization of the relationship between colonial history and contemporary diasporic experience. Other diasporic writers have engaged with partition, with colonial violence, with the discontinuities of immigrant life; Alexander is unusual in explicitly theorizing the mechanisms of transgenerational transmission—in asking not only what happened but how its effects persist and reproduce themselves across the generations. This theoretical self-consciousness, combined with Alexander's exceptional formal sophistication, makes *Manhattan Music* a particularly significant contribution to the literary representation of postcolonial experience.

8. Conclusion

This paper has argued that *Manhattan Music* engages with transgenerational trauma and postcolonial identity through a series of interrelated formal and thematic strategies. At the level of narrative structure, the novel's temporal fragmentation enacts the psychic structure of traumatic intrusion, refusing the reader the consolation of chronological sequence. At the level of character, Sandhya embodies the condition of a subject formed by historical violence she cannot claim as her own—a wound she has inherited but cannot recover, a memory that belongs to her without belonging to her experience. At the level of metaphor, the figure of music allows Alexander to represent the recursive temporality of traumatic memory, the affective transmission of historical experience, and the hybrid cultural negotiations of diasporic existence.

The paper has also argued that Alexander's representation of transgenerational trauma is not simply a literature of victimhood. The novel insists on the possibility of agency within the constraints of traumatic inheritance—not the agency of overcoming or transcending the past, but the agency of engaging critically and creatively with its meanings. Sandhya's struggle to understand and articulate the structures of historical violence that have shaped her is itself a form of political consciousness, a refusal of the unconscious determination that unexamined traumatic inheritance enforces.

More broadly, *Manhattan Music* contributes to what might be called a politics of postcolonial memory—an insistence that the traumatic histories of colonialism remain alive and consequential in the present, shaping the psychic lives of diasporic subjects and demanding acknowledgment in public discourse. Alexander's literary project is, in this respect, not only an aesthetic achievement but a political

intervention—an act of witnessing that refuses the amnesia of colonial and neocolonial power.

Future scholarship might profitably extend the analysis offered here in several directions. A more sustained comparative analysis of *Manhattan Music* in relation to other South Asian diasporic novels of the 1990s—particularly those by women writers such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri—would illuminate both the specificity of Alexander's contribution and the broader patterns of the tradition. A more focused engagement with Alexander's poetry alongside her fiction would illuminate the continuities between her lyric and narrative modes of representing traumatic memory. And a more extended engagement with the clinical literature on transgenerational trauma would allow for a more rigorous theorization of the mechanisms of traumatic transmission that Alexander's novel so suggestively represents.

What the present analysis has demonstrated, however, is that *Manhattan Music* deserves a more central place in the scholarly conversation about postcolonial literature, trauma theory, and South Asian diasporic writing than it has thus far received. Its formal sophistication, its theoretical self-consciousness, and its unflinching engagement with the psychic costs of colonial history and diasporic displacement make it one of the most significant—and most underread—literary works of the 1990s. This paper is offered as a contribution to the effort to secure for it the scholarly attention it merits.

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RESEARCH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH (RJOE)

www.rjoe.org.in | Oray's Publications | ISSN: 2456-2696

An International Approved Peer-Reviewed and Refereed English Journal

Impact Factor: 8.576 (SJIF) | Vol. 11, Issue 2 (April/May&June;2026)

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