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Rhythmanalysing New York through Diasporic Lens: A Study of Nikhil Advani's *Kal Ho Naa Ho* and Karan Johar's *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna*

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Abstract

Bollywood movies set in New York form a significant part of the oeuvre of the cultural expressions of diasporic India. Part of the appeal of the city for Indian film-makers lies in the intensity of its rhythms and the ability of the diasporic subject to perceive these rhythms as a 'rhythmanalyst'. The diasporic subject thus becomes the perfect rhythmanalyst in that (s)he is both a part of the city's rhythm and yet, essentially outside it. He/she contributes to it, yet, (s)he can be a passive spectator, gazing at the street and the city from a location that is unique to him/her. The everyday spectacle of the street, the music of the city, can be perceived in all its complexities by the diasporic subject with his/her ability to be both internal and external to the city. The city as a text unfurls itself before the diasporic rhythmanalyst, thereby making it possible for him/her to perceive an alternate vision of the new 'homeland'. My paper attempts to explore how the diasporic subjects in Nikhil Advani's *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (2003) and Karan Johar's *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* (2006) make and perceive the rhythms in their 'adopted' homelands and how these rhythms merge into the quotidian life of the diasporic Indian in New York, as depicted in these movies.

Keywords: Rhythmanalysis, diasporic subject, spectacle, street, city spaces, homeland.

Bollywood movies set in New York form a significant part of the oeuvre of the cultural expressions of diasporic India. Part of the appeal of the city for Indian film-makers lies in the intensity of its rhythms- the noises, the movements, the subtle breath of leaves on an empty road, the blaring of vehicle horns, the shutters of a shop opening or closing, the occasional accident- and the ability of the diasporic subject to perceive these rhythms as, to adopt Henri Lefebvre's term, a 'rhythmanalyst'. As Lefebvre

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says, rhythms can be analyzed only by one who is within and at the same time, outside them. "To understand and analyze rhythms, one has to let go…but not completely. To capture a rhythm, one needs to have been captured by it" (Lefebvre 219). The diasporic subject thus becomes the perfect rhythmanalyst in that (s)he is both a part of the city's rhythm and yet, essentially outside it. He/she contributes to it, yet, (s)he can be a passive spectator, gazing at the street and the city from a location that is unique to him/her. The everyday spectacle of the street, the music of the city, can be perceived in all its complexities by the diasporic subject with his/her ability to be both internal and external to the city. The city as a text unfurls itself before the diasporic rhythmanalyst, thereby making it possible for him/her to perceive an alternate vision of the new 'homeland'. My paper attempts to explore how the diasporic subjects in Nikhil Advani's *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (2003) and Karan Johar's *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* (2006) make and perceive the rhythms in their 'adopted' homelands and how these rhythms merge into the quotidian life of the diasporic Indian in New York, as depicted in these movies.

The characteristic that marks any diasporic community distinctively is the conscious or unconscious trauma of the absence of the original homeland. The adopted homeland has to be appropriated if the diasporic subject is to feel 'homed'. And this appropriation is possible only through an observation-active or passive of the new homeland. To observe is to stand at a distance and watch as an outsider, without being totally outside the scenario unfolding in front of one. The diasporic subjects in the two movies under consideration, by virtue of them being conscious of the ambiguity of their belonging, have to be rhythmanalysts if they are to appropriate, or rather, get assimilated into the city.

Both *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* and *Kal Ho Naa Ho* employ the first person narrative technique, with Dev and Naina commenting on the incidents in their lives and introducing the lives of the other characters, both from within and outside the scenes. Both are long-term residents of New York, who introduce New York as one of the characters in the movies. The movies begin with screenshots of the sky-scrapers that mark the geography of the city. In *Kal Ho Naa Ho*, Naina begins her narrative by introducing the city as perhaps the most important character in the movie. She says:

> New York. One of the biggest cities in the world. The business capital of the world. Every breath of the city, every heartbeat, is filled with speed. Though miles away from India, there's no dearth of Indians in this city. In fact, they say every fourth face in New York is an Indian's. (Advani)

The necessity to make a homeland for oneself in the busy city is evident in the desire to stress the fact that it is home to people from one's original homeland. For Naina, the city becomes the site for identity formation and her deepest memories are rooted there. "This city taught me to be independent. It taught me to fulfill my responsibilities. … Whenever I stepped back and watched the city from a distance, I felt even closer to Papa"(Advani). 'Watching' and "walking in the city" (Badmington, and Thomas 149) becomes integral to Dev's understanding of it. It is his interactions with the other characters that happen in the street, parks, metro stations and cafes of

New York that shape the course of the story. The turning points in the story occur in public places in the city. Dev is crippled by an accident while walking on the road; Dev and Maya meet for the first time in a park; their second encounter takes place in the metro station; so do the third encounter when Dev confesses his love for Maya and the final scene where the two are at last reunited. Sam and Kiranjeet's conversation with them, which turns out to be a turning point in Dev's and Maya's lives, the meetings between the lovers, all take place in cafes. The same happens in *Kal Ho Naa Ho* as well. Aman marks his presence in the neighborhood the first day with the half-Hindi song "Pretty Woman", thereby marking his identity as an Indian, enabled to view the city as an outsider, as opposed to Naina's view as a marginal insider to the city. Rohit and Naina meet in cafes and indeed, Aman sees his beloved for the first time in one such café and the love triangle between the three get established when they are walking back home from a pub.

In *Kal Ho Naa Ho*, it is his observation of the city and its residents that make Aman a much-adored character. He perceives his neighborhood as "a boring sort of a street", which becomes colorful with his arrival. While Naina becomes a rhythmanalyst observing the city as a diasporic subject, and hence as an outsider-insider, in Aman's case, his rhythmanalytic observation of the city arises due to his infirmity. For Dev, there are two factors that make him the perfect rhythmanalyst- his status as a diasporic subject and his disability- both of which situate him at once both inside and outside the rhythms of quotidian existence in the city.

"The question of rhythm raises issues of change and repetition, identity and difference, contrast and continuity" (Lefebvre xii). The cyclical rhythms that Lefebvre talks about in *Rhythmanalysis* – night and day, sleep and wakefulness, seasonal changes, rain and sunlight- get intertwined with the linear rhythms – work and rest, mundanity and novelty, routine and carnival- in the city of New York. Dev and Naina, with their insider-outsider status, have a privileged vantage point in terms of observing these rhythms. The movies utilize elements of cyclical rhythms, intertwined with those of the linear rhythms in order to communicate the states of mind of the characters. Thus, winter and autumn, night and day, rain and sunlight etc. are used to convey the emotional turbulence that the characters undergo. And this becomes significant only because the protagonists themselves are aware of the rhythms surrounding them. As Dev and Naina tell us about their lives, their consciousness of the changes in the city around them becomes evident. As night changes into day, radical changes occur in Dev's life, after he tells his wife about his relationship with Maya. In a way, it is the work-culture of the city and his consciousness of it that makes the rhythm of the night and day important. It is their respective spouses' work schedule that determines Dev's and Maya's trysts. In *Kal Ho Naa Ho*, Naina associates Aman's arrival with a change is the season. "And suddenly the season changed. I don't know how, but the sun moved aside the dark clouds" (Advani). A major reason for the acceptance of Aman as a member of Naina's family is his location as an Indian in a foreign land, capable of analyzing the rhythms of the city in much the same way as Jennifer or Naina.

In fact, when Aman arrives, he brings with him, an element of the lost homeland, for Naina and her family- the diasporic nostalgia for the homeland. The rhythm of the homeland, i.e., India becomes incorporated into the neighborhood with his arrival. And Naina and her family do not fail to notice this. Lefebvre says: "…for there to be *change*, a social group, a class or a caste must intervene by imprinting a rhythm on an era….A group must designate itself as an *innovator or producer of meaning*. And its acts must inscribe themselves on *reality*. Occasionaly, a long time after the action, one sees the emergence of novelty" (15). Thus, Jennifer's 'Café New York' is turned into 'Café New Delhi' and the American flag is replaced by the tricolor flag of India. That becomes the way in which the lost homeland, India is "brought to New York" (Advani). They realize it when Aman explains to them, the rhythm of their street, where people queue in front of the Chinese restaurant, as the Chinese culture and food served there mark it as significantly different from the other establishments in the street. The rhythm of the street changes with the change in Jennifer's establishment. The rival Chinese restaurant loses its customers to the Indian one. There are no more queues in the former. The city's attention shifts to the latter, marking a significant change in the rhythm.

Another instance where the bringing of the lost homeland to the adopted one, changing the daily rhythm of the city and highlighting the changed rhythm which is more conducive to the diasporic imagination is when festivals and weddings are celebrated the Indian way in New York. Festivals and ceremonies form a part of what Lefebvre calls "public/social rhythms"(18). The import of the public rhythms of the lost homeland to the new one occurs when Rohit and Naina in *Kal Ho Naa Ho* and Maya and Rishi in *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* get married the traditional Gujarati and Punjabi ways respectively, with all the associated Indian music, dance baaraats, sweets and costumes. This occurs in other, subtler ways as well. When Aman tells Jennifer to invite him over since he is the new neighbor, he is importing to the New York street, an element of the music of Jennifer's lost homeland and hence, she is unable to refuse him. These elements pertaining to changed rhythms help the diasporic individual in breaking out, albeit in subtle ways, of the dressage imposed by the foreign land.

Another aspect of the city that is highlighted in both the movies is its polyrhythmia. Multiple rhythms abound in New York, thanks to its melting-pot culture and this gets showcased the best when the racial diversity of the city is brought to the forefront as when in the song sequence 'Pretty Woman', Indians, Chinese, African-Americans, Mulattoes etc. dance to the song in the street and when, in *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna*, we see Dev and Maya embracing on the pavement while people of different ethnic categories move past them. The costumes of the characters, with the Indian women of the older generation wearing the Indian salwar-kameez and the younger generation wearing traditional Indian dresses only for weddings and functions, and changing according to the seasons and the occasions, showcase the multiple rhythms that characterize the city of New York. These multiple rhythms converge to create a state of eurhythmia when "rhythms unite with one another in the state of health, in normal (which is to say, normed!) everydayness" (Lefebvre 16). In the films, this everydayness

is disrupted by a disruption of the quotidian rhythms of the diasporic households, with the extra-everyday arising in the form of the illicit love between Maya and Dev in *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* and the love triangle between Aman, Naina and Rohit, in *Kal Ho Naa Ho*. As Lefebvre remarks, this "extra-everyday rhythms the everyday and vice-versa" and this is especially so for the characters involved in the amorous relationships, who begin to attribute to the city, another aura, wherein each place becomes a meeting place, and a place of chance encounters, away from the controlling gaze of spouses and relatives.

The body becomes an important reference point in the analysis of rhythms by the characters. In both the movies, the characters in the frame become the focus when they are located static amidst a sea of moving bodies or moving traffic. Again, it is with reference to the rhythms of the body that the rhythmanalyst measures the rhythm of the city. While Naina, Jennifer, Maya and Rishi see the city from the vantage point of being diasporic subjects, Dev and Aman watch it from that of the infirm. After the accident, Dev's perception of New York changes considerably. Bitter and disappointed, in one instance, he says: "Why are people in New York so happy?"(Johar) For him, the new homeland consists of people who are happy and at ease, unlike him, who is an outsider to the city as well as his family. As for Aman, his heart condition allows him a view of the city as a beautiful place which he craves to embrace with full life. The rhythm of his neighborhood, of Naina's family, of the streets hold unattainable promises for him. It is his consciousness of his inability to embrace these that he desires to create in the people around him, an attainable happiness with reference to the city and its rhythms. It is his infirmity that makes him conscious of the individual rhythms of the city, much as Lefebvre argues in *Rhythmanalysis*. Here, it is interesting to note that the background music that accompanies Aman's gradual deterioration resembles heartbeats, once again, pointing to the possibility of a rhythmanalysis of New York city with the body as a reference point and musical time and biological time coinciding in the process.

Thus, the diasporic subject with his/her unique vantage point becomes the rhythmanalyst of New York city, with the multiple rhythms of the adopted homeland appropriated in their full intensity and incorporated into the everyday experience of the diasporic Indian in New York. The rhythms of the city never cease. There is and will be traffic, pedestrians, shoppers, benches and cafes, chance encounters, footfalls, seasons, colors. . . . The beauty of the movies lies in their portrayal of the characters as the temporary owners of rhythms belonging, yet at the same time, not belonging to them.

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