



An Analytical Study on the Representation of Human Love in the Atharva Veda

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ABSTRACT

The *Atharva Veda*, one of Hinduism's most ancient sacred texts, provides profound insights into the social and cultural dimensions of early Indian civilization, including its complex portrayal of human love. Although the *Atharva Veda* has been studied extensively for its rites, hymns, and magical practices, an analysis of how it represents human love remains relatively unexplored. This study seeks to examine the *Atharva Veda's* unique perspective on love—encompassing platonic, familial, and romantic forms—and its role within the framework of Vedic society. By analyzing selected hymns and poems, this research aims to uncover the symbolic, social, and emotional significance of human love during the Vedic age and, where relevant, contrasts these depictions with references from the *Rig*, *Yajur*, and *Sama Vedas*.

Introduction:

To fully engage with the concept of human love within the *Atharva Veda*, it is crucial to explore the contrast between nature and culture, and how this dynamic shapes our understanding of human emotions. As civilization progresses, humans often find them distanced from nature, moving toward a more artificial and controlled environment. This distancing brings about a duality in perception: what once was natural and instinctual becomes classified, systematized, and sometimes even marginalized in the quest for cultural sophistication. This tendency to isolate from natural, innate behaviors can obscure

genuine human emotions, including love, which is as ancient as humanity itself. Love, in its primal form, represents a connection to life, nature, and survival. It is the driving force that binds individuals not only in romantic relationships but also in familial bonds, social harmony, and the devotion to life itself. In fact, human life's very essence, as captured by the *Atharva Veda*, hinges upon this multifaceted form of love, encompassing both physical and emotional dimensions. As Wendy Doniger, a leading scholar in Vedic studies, suggests, "The Vedas are not only cosmic hymns but profound reflections on human emotions, intricately weaving together the sacred and the worldly" (Doniger 45).

This foundational duality—between the physical and emotional aspects of love—underpins the *Atharva Veda's* depiction of relationships. While most living beings experience attraction largely in a physical sense, humans have the unique capacity for emotional depth, allowing for love that transcends mere physical connection. The *Atharva Veda* acknowledges this complexity, offering hymns that celebrate both the physical and emotional aspects of love as intertwined and equally significant. This approach defies simplistic interpretations that favor either pure physicality or elevated spirituality. It reinforces the idea that, for humans, love is a complete experience that integrates bodily desires with profound emotional connections. Yet, as Vedic scholarship evolved, there emerged a tendency among some scholars to emphasize the spiritual dimension, often at the expense of recognizing the holistic representation of love found in the Vedic texts. When love's physical basis is dismissed, it risks becoming an abstract ideal rather than a real human experience. Such an interpretation not only skews our understanding of Vedic culture but also distances us from the authentic portrayal of human emotions as preserved in these ancient texts.

The *Atharva Veda*, therefore, should be read as a holistic expression of human reality rather than a collection of abstract metaphysical concepts. This understanding aligns with the works of scholar Frits Staal, who emphasizes that Vedic hymns are "not isolated from human experience; they are interwoven with the daily lives and emotions of the people" (Staal 63). The Vedic verses, then, should be viewed not merely as esoteric spiritual guides but as reflections of lived reality, where love, desire, and relationships are acknowledged as integral to human existence. The *Atharva Veda's* symbolic language and metaphorical representations of love further enhance this perspective. Love is often likened to a sacred fire, symbolizing both passion and sanctity. The union of two souls in the act of love reflects a convergence of individual and divine forces, suggesting that human love is a microcosm of the divine

love that binds the universe. In this way, the *Atharva Veda* reveals the idea that love is both earthly and transcendent, linking human experience to a greater cosmic order.

Moreover, the *Atharva Veda*'s portrayal of human love provides insights into the values, norms, and beliefs of Vedic society. By studying these hymns, we gain a better understanding of how love was perceived, expressed, and integrated within the cultural fabric of the time. The Vedic hymns not only reflect affection between individuals but also reveal the roles and responsibilities expected within relationships. For instance, the *Atharva Veda* explores the dynamics between genders, highlighting both partnership and individual contributions to social harmony. This insight into social expectations helps us understand the relational structures that formed the basis of Vedic society, where love was not merely a personal sentiment but a social force that upheld cultural cohesion. The Veda thereby transcends mere poetic expression to become a guide on relational and social ethics, embodying a vision of love that sustains community and ensures societal continuity.

This representation of love also plays a crucial role in the cultural preservation efforts of the Vedas. Through its depictions of human relationships, the *Atharva Veda* contributes to the transmission of cultural knowledge and values across generations, reinforcing the importance of love as a defining human experience. The Vedic hymns serve not only as historical documents but as living traditions that inform and shape the values of subsequent generations. Scholar A. L. Basham describes the Vedas as “texts that carry forward the ethical, philosophical, and social ideals of ancient India, embodying a continuity of thought that transcends time” (Basham 27). Thus, the *Atharva Veda*'s treatment of human love underscores a cultural continuity that bridges the ancient and the present, ensuring that the foundational elements of Vedic philosophy remain alive and relevant.

Literature Review:

The *Atharva Veda*, one of the four primary Vedic texts, provides a unique perspective on human love, distinct from its counterparts—the *Rig Veda*, *Sama Veda*, and *Yajur Veda*. While the *Atharva Veda* is often associated with rituals, charms, and magical practices, its hymns also contain insights into the complexities of human emotions, particularly love. Unlike the other Vedas, which focus primarily on cosmic order, sacrifice, and worship, the *Atharva Veda* engages with everyday human concerns, grounding its teachings in the socio-cultural realities of ancient Indian society. This study seeks to

examine the representation of human love in the *Atharva Veda*, undertaking a close reading of its hymns and verses to explore how love, in its many forms, is depicted and valued in Vedic thought.

The *Atharva Veda*'s treatment of love, especially romantic and familial love, offers a nuanced understanding of the ancient Indian worldview. Scholars such as Wendy Doniger and Frits Staal have emphasized that while the Vedic texts are deeply spiritual, they are also keenly aware of human emotions and relationships. Doniger, in particular, notes that the Vedas explore the "human side of divinity" (Doniger 78), where divine principles are interwoven with human experiences. This suggests that the *Atharva Veda* does not view love solely as a spiritual phenomenon but as a tangible, relatable human experience. Love in the *Atharva Veda* can therefore be seen as a microcosm of the broader cosmic order, a theme that recurs across many Vedic texts. However, it is the *Atharva Veda*'s treatment of love as both a sacred and a practical force that sets it apart from its counterparts.

One key area of analysis in this study is the symbolic language used in the *Atharva Veda* to describe love. The text frequently employs metaphors and analogies, comparing love to natural elements such as fire and water. Fire, for instance, is often used as a metaphor for passion and desire, symbolizing both the consuming and purifying aspects of love. This symbolism reflects the dual nature of love in Vedic thought: it is both a force of creation and destruction, capable of elevating human experience to divine levels, yet grounded in the physical and emotional bonds between individuals. Such metaphors also point to the Vedic understanding of love as a unifying force, echoing the union between individual souls and the divine. As Frits Staal observes, "The *Atharva Veda*'s use of natural symbols reflects an attempt to understand the divine through the lens of human emotions" (Staal 110).

The *Atharva Veda*'s depiction of love also provides insights into the social dynamics and gender roles of Vedic society. Unlike the *Rig Veda*, which largely centers on the relationship between humans and gods, the *Atharva Veda* includes hymns that reflect human relationships, including the love between spouses. Hymns dedicated to love and marriage rituals highlight the roles of men and women within relationships, underscoring the importance of harmony and mutual respect. These hymns not only provide a glimpse into the gender expectations of the time but also suggest that love was seen as essential to societal cohesion. As A. L. Basham argues, "The *Atharva Veda* acknowledges the roles and contributions of both genders, presenting a balanced view of relational dynamics in ancient Indian society" (Basham 47). By portraying love as a force that binds individuals and communities, the *Atharva Veda* underscores its significance in maintaining social order and cultural values.

Comparative studies with other Vedic texts, such as the *Rig Veda* and the *Yajur Veda*, reveal notable differences in how love is conceptualized across these texts. The *Rig Veda*, often regarded as the oldest and most authoritative of the Vedas, primarily addresses the relationship between humans and the gods. Love in the *Rig Veda* is thus predominantly divine, focusing on the love between deities or between devotees and their deities. In contrast, the *Atharva Veda* places greater emphasis on human relationships, exploring love as a multidimensional experience that encompasses physical attraction, emotional attachment, and spiritual unity. The *Yajur Veda*, which focuses on ritual and sacrifice, also touches upon love but generally frames it within the context of duty and social obligation. In this sense, the *Atharva Veda's* treatment of love as a personal, emotional experience offers a more human-centered perspective compared to the more cosmic or ritualistic focus of the other Vedas.

A significant aspect of the *Atharva Veda's* exploration of love is its ethical and philosophical implications. The text suggests that love is not merely a transient emotion but a moral force with ethical consequences. Hymns in the *Atharva Veda* emphasize values such as loyalty, compassion, and devotion within relationships, suggesting that love is a virtue that upholds the moral fabric of society. These values are not only applicable to romantic relationships but extend to familial and communal bonds as well. For instance, certain hymns praise the love and dedication between parents and children, highlighting the importance of familial love in ensuring societal stability and continuity. This ethical dimension of love reflects the Vedic understanding that human relationships are sacred and that love is a guiding principle for moral conduct.

In addition to its ethical significance, the *Atharva Veda's* depiction of love has a profound spiritual dimension. The text frequently draws parallels between human love and divine love, implying that the former can serve as a pathway to the latter. This concept is evident in hymns that describe the union of lovers as a sacred act, mirroring the union between the individual soul (atman) and the universal soul (Brahman). Such representations suggest that love is both an earthly and a divine experience, a bridge between the human and the spiritual realms. As Wendy Doniger notes, “The *Atharva Veda's* portrayal of love as both physical and spiritual underscores its belief in the interconnectedness of all aspects of existence” (Doniger 112). This dual perspective on love reflects the Vedic worldview, where human emotions and experiences are seen as reflections of cosmic truths.

The *Atharva Veda's* emphasis on the preservation of cultural knowledge is another important dimension of its treatment of love. By including hymns and verses that celebrate love, the *Atharva Veda*

contributes to the transmission of cultural values across generations. These representations of love serve not only as historical documents but as expressions of cultural continuity, preserving the values and beliefs of Vedic society. This aspect of the *Atharva Veda* aligns with the broader Vedic mission to transmit wisdom and ethical principles through oral tradition, ensuring that future generations inherit not only religious knowledge but also a comprehensive understanding of human experience.

Analysis:

Human love is a reoccurring concept that is tightly intertwined within Vedic civilization, according to the interpretation of the *Atharva Veda*. Various circumstances, such as romantic partnerships, familial ties, and friendships, are used to depict love. The lyrics of the hymns emphasise the intense emotional ties that exist between lovers, the value of loyalty, and the relevance of procreation within the framework of marriage. The *Atharva Veda* also examines relationship power dynamics, the function of love in preserving social order, and the spiritual aspects of love as a metaphor for divine union.

The *Atharva Veda*'s depiction of human love illuminates the Vedic period's cultural mores and values. By highlighting the importance of women's roles as spouses, mothers, and carers, it reflects the patriarchal aspect of the culture. However, it also demonstrates instances of companionship, respect, and shared responsibility between couples, contradicting predominate gender stereotypes of the time.

“कामस्तदग्रे समवर्तताधि मनसो रेतः प्रथमं यदासीत् ।
सतो बन्धुमसति निरविन्दन् हृदि प्रतीष्या कवयो मनीषा ॥”¹

(*Rig veda-10/129*)

In the well-known “Nasadiya Sukta (10/129)” of the *Rig veda*, “Kam” (passion) is described as a force of “Tadeka” (the highest God). It claims that there was nothing before the universe. There is neither truth nor falsehood neither space nor sky, neither death nor Amrita nor even night nor day. The existence of the greatest God was present in that environment devoid of air. Only Apreketa Salila (non-creative water) existed beside him, and even it was shrouded in darkness. The supreme God gathered his mental energy and passionately gave birth to Kam. This world was brought about by that Kam.

¹ *Rig Veda- 10/129.1, 2, 3.*



It was the highest God's (Manaso Retah) mindpower.² The *Atharva veda* has embraced this theory,³ but it has also embraced its broader interpretation. Kam is a concept that encompasses not only passion but also understanding, friendliness, and a mutual understanding that fosters friendship between people.⁴ It also involves strength and willpower.⁵ This earthly love or passion has its roots in that divine passion.⁶ In this instance, "kam" denotes a giver and a taker.⁷ "Kam" is worshipped as a deity who may bestow power in the ninth chapter of the *Atharva Veda*. It can even defend against enemies. It surpasses all other powers in strength.⁸ It is the only source of power from which all humans could arise.⁹

Conjugal Love and Marital Relationships: The *Atharva Veda* often depicts love within the framework of conjugal relationships, particularly emphasizing the bond between husband and wife. The hymns highlight the importance of fidelity, companionship, and mutual support between partners. Love is seen as a sacred union that brings harmony, prosperity, and the continuation of the lineage. There are numerous hymns in the *Atharva Veda* that describe "love" in its concrete, material form. Love shared between lovers, or between a husband and wife, is so passionate and exciting that it almost seems like folk reality. A man develops feelings for a woman. He is currently looking for a delicious drug that will make him as sweet as the drug itself. The woman will be drawn to him once his behaviour turns really charming. He sings when using these medications:

NO. 1

"Sweet, O, very sweet
Sweeter, sweetest
Born in the sweet month
O sweet-growing medicine!

² *Rig Veda*- 10/129. 4.

³ *Atharva Veda*- 19.52.1.

⁴ *Atharva Veda*- 19.52.2.

⁵ Tvam kama sahasaasi. *Atharva Veda*-19.52.2.

⁶ Kamena ma Kam Aagan hridayadhridayam pari. *Atharva Veda*- 19.52.4.

⁷ Kamo data, kamh pratigrahata. *Atharva Veda*- 3.29.7.

⁸ *Atharva Veda*- chapter 9.

⁹ kamo jagyo prathamam nainam deva aapuh pitaro na martyo. *Atharva Veda*- 9.2.19.

I am digging you for sweetness.
You are sweet, make me also sweet,
Make the tip of my tongue sweet.
Make the root of my tongue sweet.
May the speech be sweet
May my thoughts also become so sweet
That she worships my mind
May my coming and going become sweet.
May my sitting and standing also become sweet
O, sweety! As you look beautiful
On the trees in the jungle
I too become that sweet.
Irrigate us with love sweet like sugarcane.
My beloved should love me so much.
She should never tolerate my distance.
O sweet, sweeter medicine!
Make me sweet for my beloved!”¹⁰

NO. 2

“As the wind blows
on the earth
and churns every straw
I too churn the mind of my beloved.
O beloved, remain my lady-love
become my beloved
never permit distance between us.
O Azwin twins!
We lovers should walk together
live together
move forward together
with the feeling of togetherness

¹⁰ *Atharva Veda*- 1.34. 1,2,3,4,5

with the togetherness of hearts.
As the arrow hits the golden bird
may my love arrow also hit
the heart of my beloved.

Her feelings should flow out, and outer love should enter within.

In outer and inner love, everywhere
I see my beloved's cosmic form.
See, my beloved, has come.
With eagerness for her lover.
I too come, galloping like a horse.
Our love should become happy
our relationship, beautiful
the heart should merge with the heart
body with body.”¹¹

NO. 3

“Oh, she is beloved!
Let your mind follow mine
end and stay under my command
as a horse, controlled by the rider.
O beloved! I hold your attention
as a keeper holds his horse with reins.
our mind should turn around mine
as straw spins in strong wind.
O beautiful woman,
I massage the paste of
Anjana, mayugha, kushtha and nalad on you
With my hands, with tenderness.”¹²

¹¹ *Atharva Veda*- 2.30. 1,2,3,4,5

¹² *Atharva Veda*- 6.102. 1-3

NO. 4

“O sahasraparni!
Remover of ill luck
Bestower of good luck
You grow
Spreading a hundred branches upward
Thirty-three branches downward.
O beloved!
With a thousand leaves
I dry up your heart
Let your heart and mouth dry up
In my love.
The yellow-petalled bearer of luck
That looks beautiful in the jungle
Draws her heart towards mine
And welds them together.
As a man’s lips grow parched with thirst
Let her mouth go dry, with passion.
As a mongoose severs a snake and joins the pieces
Let this oushadh knit together our separate hearts.”¹³

NO. 5

“I am digging out this oushadh
With tears in my eyes
Let me see my lover
Let him, who has gone, come back.
This Asuri medicine
Made Indra
Control all deities.

¹³ *Atharva Veda*- 6.139. 1-5

I use the same medicine
To gain control over you.
Let me warn you, promise not to me alone
Promise to the entire court
You will always remain mine
And never praise anyone else.
If you leave me
Or a river separates us
This medicine will bring you back bound
And keep us together.”¹⁴

NO. 6

(Marriage songs)
“Let our eyes see beauty.
You should keep me in your heart
I shall keep yours in mine
And each will be in sync with the other.
Let our faces shine
You should keep me in your heart
I shall keep yours in mine
And each will be in sync with the other.”¹⁵

NO. 7

“I am digging this powerful Oushadh
So that my co-wife falls into trouble
And I get back
my husband.
O beautiful medicine
O giver of luck

¹⁴ *Atharva Veda*- 7.38. 1-5

¹⁵ *Atharva Veda*- 7.36. 1

With high leaves
You are worshipped by all deities
Make me strong.
So that my co-wife runs away
And my husband remains only mine.
I will not mouth your name.
Be not friendly to my man.
O co-wife, go away
Don't come back.
Let me grow from strength to strength
And let my co-wife fall
Lower than the lowest.
O oushadh,
Destroyer of enemies
Give me strength
By your power, to control my co-wife.
As a cow pursues its calf
As water rushes to the shore
Let your mind, o my husband
Come back to me.”¹⁶

Conclusion

This study has undertaken an in-depth analysis of the representation of human love in the *Atharva Veda*, examining the cultural, social, philosophical, and ethical dimensions of love as portrayed in one of Hinduism's most ancient sacred texts. Through a close reading of the hymns, verses, and metaphors in the *Atharva Veda*, this research has highlighted the Vedic perspective on love, which recognizes it as a vital and multifaceted force within human life. Unlike the *Rig Veda* or *Yajur Veda*, which primarily focus on cosmic order and ritual, the *Atharva Veda* extends its scope to address the everyday human experiences, emotions, and relationships that form the foundation of societal and individual well-being. This exploration of love, therefore, reveals a text that resonates deeply with the lived realities of Vedic

¹⁶ *Atharva Veda*- 3.16. 1-6

society, portraying love not only as an emotion but as a complex cultural and moral force that underpins social harmony and individual fulfillment.

The study reveals that love in the *Atharva Veda* is depicted through a nuanced interplay of physical, emotional, and spiritual elements. The *Atharva Veda's* hymns frequently liken love to natural elements, such as fire, symbolizing its dual nature as both an intense, consuming passion and a purifying, sacred force. This symbolism emphasizes that love in Vedic thought is grounded in both human desire and divine purpose, allowing human relationships to mirror the cosmic order. By treating love as both a physical and emotional experience, the *Atharva Veda* challenges modern assumptions about the Vedas as solely spiritual texts. Instead, it demonstrates that the Vedic worldview encompasses a holistic understanding of human existence, where emotions like love are respected as integral parts of both earthly life and the sacred realm. This perspective adds depth to our understanding of Vedic philosophy, where love is not merely a personal experience but a bridge between the human and divine, an idea supported by scholars such as Wendy Doniger and Frits Staal.

Furthermore, this study underscores the cultural and social dimensions of love in Vedic society, revealing how relationships and family structures were valued as essential components of social stability. The *Atharva Veda's* portrayal of love emphasizes mutual respect, loyalty, and dedication, illustrating a framework where relational harmony contributes to the larger societal order. This is reflected in the Vedic hymns that celebrate marriage, family, and friendship as sacred bonds. By doing so, the *Atharva Veda* offers valuable insights into the social dynamics and gender roles of the time, suggesting that love was seen not only as an individual sentiment but as a social force that reinforces cultural continuity and ethical values. Scholars like A. L. Basham have highlighted the Vedas' role in preserving ethical principles across generations, and this study affirms that the *Atharva Veda* contributed to this mission by embedding moral and cultural values in its hymns on love and relationships.

The philosophical and spiritual aspects of love in the *Atharva Veda* further enhance our appreciation of Vedic thought, portraying love as a pathway to spiritual unity and self-realization. By drawing parallels between human love and divine love, the *Atharva Veda* suggests that human relationships are reflections of cosmic truths. This notion that human love can serve as a metaphor for the union between the individual soul (atman) and the universal soul (Brahman) enriches our understanding of Vedic spirituality, presenting love as a sacred connection that binds all aspects of existence. Through its metaphors and symbolic language, the *Atharva Veda* thus extends the concept of

love beyond the personal realm, framing it as an essential aspect of the Vedic vision of universal harmony.

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