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Love Beyond Time

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Abstract

William Shakespeare's *Sonnet 116*, beginning "Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments," is a powerful reflection on the nature of true love. The poem argues that genuine love remains firm even when people, circumstances, beauty, and time change. Shakespeare presents love as an "ever-fixed mark" that survives storms and as a guiding star that helps lost ships find their way. Although physical beauty fades under the power of Time, true love continues "to the edge of doom." This paper studies the poem's literary devices, structure, themes, tone, historical background, audience, and purpose. It also compares Shakespeare's understanding of constant love with teachings from the Vedas, Upaniṣads, *Śrīmad Bhagavad Gītā*, *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*, *Vachanāmṛta*, and other Indian scriptures. The comparison shows that Shakespeare's ideal of unchanging love has meaningful similarities with Vedic marital unity, steadfast devotion, selfless love, and spiritual constancy. However, the paper does not claim that Shakespeare directly borrowed from Indian scriptures. It presents a comparative dialogue between Renaissance poetry and Vedāntic wisdom.

Keywords: true love, constancy, time, marriage, devotion, Shakespeare, Vedānta, bhakti, Akṣara–Puruṣottama Darśana

Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Sonnet 116* is one of the most famous poems about true love in English literature. It was included in Shakespeare's collection of 154 sonnets, published in 1609. Unlike poems that present love as temporary passion or physical attraction, this sonnet defines true love as constant, selfless, and unchanging.

The poem begins:

"Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments."

The expression "marriage of true minds" refers to a deep union between two persons who understand and remain faithful to one another. The word "marriage" may include marital love, but the poem's meaning is wider. It points toward a union of minds, values, emotions, and commitments.

Shakespeare then explains what true love is not. Love is not genuine if it changes whenever circumstances change. It does not disappear when one person becomes distant or different. True love is an "ever-fixed mark" that remains firm during storms. It is also a star that guides a wandering ship. Physical beauty may fade under the power of Time, but true love continues until the end of life and even "to the edge of doom."

The poem develops through three main ideas:

1. True love is a union of faithful minds.
2. True love does not change with circumstances or physical beauty.
3. True love remains firm against time, hardship, and death.

Indian scriptures also discuss unity, loyalty, selflessness, devotion, and unchanging spiritual love. The present paper compares these teachings with Shakespeare's poem. However, there is no historical evidence that Shakespeare studied the Vedas, Upaniṣads, or Vedāntic texts. The similarities presented here are philosophical parallels, not proof of direct influence.

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1. Literary Devices and Figures of Speech

1.1 Metaphor

The poem is built around several powerful metaphors. The opening expression, “marriage of true minds,” is itself metaphorical. Minds cannot literally marry. Shakespeare uses marriage to represent a deep union between two people whose thoughts, values, and commitments are joined.

The word “impediments” comes from the language of the Christian marriage service. An impediment is something that prevents a marriage from being legally or morally valid. Shakespeare declares that no external obstacle should be admitted into the union of genuinely loving minds.

The most important metaphor appears in:

“O no! it is an ever-fixed mark

That looks on tempests and is never shaken.”

The “ever-fixed mark” may suggest a lighthouse, sea-mark, or firm structure used by sailors for direction. Storms cannot move it. In the same way, true love remains steady during difficulties.

Love is then compared to a star:

“It is the star to every wandering bark.”

Here, “bark” means a ship. Before modern navigation, sailors used stars to guide them. True love is therefore presented as a stable source of direction for people who are confused or “wandering.”

1.2 Personification

Time is personified as a destroyer carrying a sickle:

“Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks

Within his bending sickle’s compass come.”

Time is presented as a powerful figure who cuts down youth and beauty. The sickle is traditionally associated with harvesting and death. Everything within its “compass,” or range, must eventually decline.

Love is also personified. It “looks on tempests,” guides wandering ships, and “bears it out” until the end of time. These human actions make love appear like a living and courageous force.

1.3 Imagery and symbolism

The poem contains vivid visual images:

- The “marriage of true minds” suggests unity and commitment.
- The “ever-fixed mark” suggests stability.
- “Tempests” represent difficulties, conflicts, and suffering.
- The “star” represents guidance and hope.
- The “wandering bark” represents a person searching for direction.
- “Rosy lips and cheeks” represent youth and physical beauty.
- Time’s “bending sickle” represents ageing and death.

- The “edge of doom” represents the end of life or the Last Judgement.

The central symbols may be summarized as follows:

Symbol	Meaning
Marriage of true minds	Deep mental and spiritual unity
Impediments	Obstacles to genuine love
Ever-fixed mark	Stability and faithfulness
Tempests	Hardships and changing circumstances
Star	Guidance, hope, and constancy
Wandering bark	A person needing direction
Rosy lips and cheeks	Youth and physical beauty
Time’s sickle	Ageing, decay, and death
Edge of doom	The end of life or time

1.4 Repetition and sound

Shakespeare repeats the words “love” and “alter” to make his definition clear:

“Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds.”

The repetition creates a logical and memorable statement: love that changes whenever circumstances change is not true love.

Alliteration appears in expressions such as “marriage of true minds” and “bending sickle’s compass come.” Consonant and vowel sounds give the poem a controlled and serious rhythm.

1.5 Paradox, hyperbole, and irony

The statement “Love is not love” appears paradoxical. However, Shakespeare means that what people commonly call love may not be genuine if it changes with circumstances.

The poem also contains hyperbole. Shakespeare claims that true love remains firm until “the edge of doom.” This means that real love continues until the end of life or the end of the world.

The concluding couplet contains a bold logical challenge:

“If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.”

Shakespeare says that if his definition of love is wrong, then he has never written anything and no person has ever truly loved. Since he clearly has written, the reader is encouraged to accept his argument. This gives the conclusion the force of a formal proof.

2. Structure and Form

Sonnet 116 is a Shakespearean sonnet containing fourteen lines. It is divided into three quatrains and a final rhyming couplet. Its rhyme scheme is:

ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

The poem is written mainly in iambic pentameter. Each line generally contains five metrical units, with an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. The regular rhythm supports the poem's subject because its steady movement reflects the constancy of true love.

The argument develops in four stages:

Section	Main idea
Lines 1–4	True love does not change or surrender
Lines 5–8	Love is a fixed mark and a guiding star
Lines 9–12	Love survives the destruction caused by Time
Lines 13–14	The poet strongly defends his definition

The phrase “O no!” in line 5 creates an important turn in the poem. The first quatrain explains what love is not, while the second positively defines what love is.

Enjambment occurs when the meaning continues into the next line:

“Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle’s compass come.”

The continuation shows the movement of beauty into the reach of Time. In contrast, the poem’s many firm pauses strengthen its calm, controlled, and certain tone.

3. Main Themes

3.1 True love

The central theme is the nature of true love. Shakespeare does not define love as desire, attraction, or temporary pleasure. True love is a lasting commitment between “true minds.”

3.2 Constancy and change

The poem creates a strong contrast between love and change. Circumstances, appearances, and emotions may change, but genuine love remains firm.

“Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds.”

This does not mean that loving relationships never face problems. It means that true love does not disappear simply because difficulties arise.

3.3 Love and time

Time destroys physical beauty. “Rosy lips and cheeks” will become old, and every body will eventually die. However, Shakespeare claims that love is not “Time’s fool.” True love is not controlled by youth or outward appearance.

3.4 Love as guidance

The image of the star presents love as a source of direction. A ship may wander during darkness or storms, but the star remains fixed. Similarly, constant love gives emotional and moral direction during uncertain periods.

3.5 Spiritual depth

The phrase “marriage of true minds” suggests that the highest form of love is not based only on the body. It includes understanding, loyalty, truthfulness, and inner unity. This allows the poem to enter into dialogue with spiritual ideas of selfless devotion and lasting relationship.

4. Tone, Mood, Historical Context, and Audience

The tone of the poem is serious, confident, and authoritative. Shakespeare does not speak with doubt. He sounds like a witness presenting a clear definition before a court.

The mood is reassuring and uplifting. The poem encourages the reader to believe that true love can survive separation, hardship, ageing, and death.

The poem belongs to the English Renaissance. Shakespeare wrote during a period in which poets often discussed love, beauty, time, betrayal, and human character. Many Renaissance love poems focused on physical beauty or emotional desire. *Sonnet 116* is different because it emphasizes constancy and inner union.

The immediate audience may be a particular beloved, but the poem is also addressed to all people who wish to understand genuine love. Its purpose is to distinguish lasting love from temporary attraction and to present constancy as the main test of love.

5. “Marriage of True Minds” and Vedic Marital Unity

The opening expression has a meaningful parallel in the Vedic understanding of marriage as a union of hearts, responsibilities, and sacred commitments.

The *Rgveda* 10.85 is traditionally known as the *Sūryā* marriage hymn. Verse 10.85.47 prays:

समञ्जन्तु विश्वे देवाः समापो हृदयानि नौ ।

सं मातरिश्वा सं धाता समु देष्ट्री दधातुनौ ॥

sam añjantu viśve devāḥ sam āpo hṛdayāni nau

sam mātariśvā sam dhātā sam u deṣṭrī dadhātu nau

May all the gods unite us; may the waters unite our hearts; may Mātariśvan, Dhātṛ, and the divine guide join us together.

Shakespeare’s “marriage of true minds” and the Vedic prayer for united hearts share a common ideal: marriage is more than physical companionship. It requires inner harmony, shared intention, loyalty, and mutual responsibility.

However, the traditions are not identical. Shakespeare presents a poetic ideal of love, while the Vedic hymn belongs to a sacred marriage setting in which the union is connected with dharma, family, society, and divine blessing.

6. Unchanging Love and the Unchanging Self

Shakespeare defines love as something that does not change when it encounters change. Vedānta also distinguishes between changing bodily conditions and the unchanging spiritual self.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* 2.13 states:

देहिनोऽस्मिन्यथा देहे कौमारं यौवनं जरा ।
तथा देहान्तरप्राप्तिर्धीरस्तत्र न मुह्यति ॥

The embodied self passes through childhood, youth, and old age, while remaining the conscious experiencer of these changes.

The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 1.2.18 describes the self as unborn, eternal, and not destroyed when the body dies. The same teaching is repeated in *Bhagavad Gītā* 2.20:

न जायते म्रियते वा कदाचिन्
नायं भूत्वा भविता वा न भूयः ।
अजो नित्यः शाश्वतोऽयं पुराणो
न हन्यते हन्यमाने शरीरे ॥

na jāyate mriyate vā kadācin
nāyaṁ bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ
ajo nityaḥ śāśvato 'yaṁ purāṇo
na hanyate hanyamāne śarīre

The ātman is never born and never dies. It is not destroyed when the body is destroyed.

Shakespearean love should not be directly identified with the ātman. Yet the comparison is useful. The poem moves love away from physical appearance and toward inward constancy. Vedānta similarly teaches that the deepest identity of a person is not the changing body.

7. “Ever-Fixed Mark” and Steadfast Devotion

Shakespeare’s “ever-fixed mark” remains firm during tempests. This resembles the scriptural ideal of steady devotion that is not destroyed by happiness, sorrow, praise, criticism, or difficulty.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* 12.13–14 describes the ideal devotee:

अद्वेष्टा सर्वभूतानां मैत्रः करुण एव च ।
निर्ममो निरहङ्कारः समदुःखसुखः क्षमी ॥
सन्तुष्टः सततं योगी यतात्मा दृढनिश्चयः ।
मय्यर्पितमनोबुद्धिर्यो मद्भक्तः स मे प्रियः ॥

adveṣṭā sarva-bhūtānāṁ maitraḥ karuṇa eva ca
nirmamo nirahaṅkāraḥ sama-duḥkha-sukhaḥ kṣamī
santuṣṭaḥ satataṁ yogī yatātmā dṛḍha-niścayaḥ

The devotee is free from hatred, friendly, compassionate, patient, balanced in pleasure and pain, self-controlled, firm in determination, and offers mind and intellect to God.

The term *dṛḍha-niścayaḥ*, “firm in determination,” is especially relevant. Like Shakespeare’s fixed mark, the genuine devotee is not shaken by life’s tempests.

The *Gītā* 9.14 also describes devotees as constantly glorifying God and worshipping with firm vows:

सततं कीर्तयन्तो मां यतन्तश्च दृढव्रताः ।

satataṁ kīrtayanto mām yatantaś ca dṛḍha-vratāḥ

Their devotion is continuous and firm rather than occasional or dependent on favourable circumstances.

8. “Love Is Not Love Which Alters”: Selfless Bhakti

The *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa* 1.2.6 defines the highest dharma as devotion that is without selfish motive and cannot be interrupted:

स वै पुंसां परो धर्मो यतो भक्तिरधोक्षजे ।
अहैतुक्यप्रतिहता ययात्मा सुप्रसीदति ॥

dehino 'smin yathā dehe kaumāraṁ yauvanaṁ jarā
tathā dehāntara-prāptir dhīras tatra na muhyati
sa vai puṁsāṁ paro dharmo yato bhaktir adhokṣaje
ahaituky apratihātā yayātmā suprasīdati

The highest dharma is that which produces devotion to the Supreme Lord—devotion that is *ahaitukī*, without selfish cause, and *apratihatā*, unobstructed.

This verse gives a spiritual parallel to Shakespeare’s definition

Shakespeare’s true love	Bhāgavata’s pure devotion
Does not alter with change	Is not interrupted by circumstances
Does not surrender to obstacles	Is <i>apratihatā</i> , unobstructed
Is not based only on beauty	Is <i>ahaitukī</i> , without selfish motive
Remains until the edge of doom	Continues through all stages of life
Guides the wandering person	Directs consciousness toward God

Romantic love and divine bhakti are not the same. Nevertheless, both texts reject selfish, unstable attachment and praise faithfulness that continues through difficulty.

Prahlāda’s devotion in the *Bhāgavata* is an important example. Although he was threatened and tortured by his father Hiraṇyakaśipu, his devotion to Bhagavān did not change. He remained spiritually fixed during severe “tempests.” His life demonstrates the meaning of devotion that cannot be altered by external pressure.

9. “Love’s Not Time’s Fool”: Beauty, Time, and Spiritual Love

Shakespeare accepts that physical beauty is controlled by time:

“Though rosy lips and cheeks

Within his bending sickle’s compass come.”

The image of rosy lips and cheeks represents youth. Time’s sickle shows that ageing and death will destroy bodily beauty.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* 2.14 teaches that bodily experiences come and go and should be endured. Verse 2.27 states that death is certain for everyone who is born. From a Vedāntic perspective, love that depends entirely upon youth, beauty, pleasure, or physical possession cannot remain constant.

The *Mahābhārata* repeatedly teaches that time overcomes worldly power, wealth, beauty, and life. Ādi Śaṅkarācārya’s *Bhaja Govindam* similarly declares:

मा कुरु धनजनयौवनगर्वं
हरति निमेषात्कालः सर्वम् ।

*mā kuru dhana-jana-yauvana-garvaṃ
harati nimeṣāt kālaḥ sarvaṃ*

Do not be proud of wealth, followers, or youth, because Time removes everything in a moment.

Shakespeare and Śaṅkarācārya agree that youth and physical attractiveness cannot last. Shakespeare responds by locating true love beyond changing beauty. Śaṅkarācārya uses the same truth to teach detachment and God-realization.

10. The Guiding Star and Divine Direction

Shakespeare calls love:

“the star to every wandering bark.”

The star is stable even when the ship is lost. Vedāntic and bhakti traditions also present God, scripture, and the realized Guru as sources of guidance.

The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 1.2.12 instructs the sincere seeker to approach a spiritually established Guru in order to understand the eternal truth:

तद्विज्ञानार्थं स गुरुमेवाभिगच्छेत्

समित्पाणिः श्रोत्रियं ब्रह्मनिष्ठम् ॥

*tad-vijñānārthaṃ sa gurum evābhigacchet
samiṭ-pāṇiḥ śrotriyaṃ brahma-niṣṭham*

Just as a star gives direction to a wandering ship, the Guru gives spiritual direction to a seeker wandering through doubt, attachment, and ignorance.

The comparison has limits. Shakespeare’s star represents true love itself, while the Upaniṣadic teacher guides the seeker toward Brahmayāgyā. Yet both images emphasize the importance of a fixed source of direction.

11. The *Vachanāmṛta* and Unflinching Love for God

The *Vachanāmṛta* repeatedly describes firm faith, constant devotion, and love for God that does not weaken under changing circumstances.

11.1 Ekāntika devotion

In *Vachanāmṛta* Gadhadā I-21, Bhagavān Swaminarayan explains *ekāntika dharma* through dharma, ātma-realization, detachment, and devotion combined with an understanding of God’s greatness. Such devotion is not temporary emotion; it is supported by spiritual knowledge and disciplined conduct.

This gives depth to Shakespeare’s “marriage of true minds.” A spiritual relationship becomes lasting when it rests upon truth, understanding, discipline, and shared commitment rather than emotion alone.

11.2 Unflinching affection

In *Vachanāmṛta* Gadhadā I-78, Bhagavān Swaminarayan explains that one who fully understands God’s greatness develops unflinching affection for God and God’s devotees.

This affection is not transferred to temporary objects when circumstances change.

Similarly, Gadhadā III-24 includes unflinching devotion to God, together with knowledge of God’s greatness, among the important spiritual disciplines of an *ekāntika bhakta*.

The expression “ever-fixed mark” may therefore be compared with *dr̥ḍha-bhakti*—firm devotion. A true devotee remains spiritually stable through pleasure and pain, success and failure, honour and criticism.

11.3 Akṣara–Puruṣottama interpretation

According to Akṣara–Puruṣottama Darśana, the aspirant associates with the manifest Akṣarabrahma Guru, becomes *akṣararūpa*, and offers exclusive devotion to Parabrahman Puruṣottama.

This relationship is not governed by physical beauty or worldly benefit. It is based on knowledge of God’s greatness, faithful refuge, service, and devotion. Therefore, the highest spiritual form of unchanging love is *Puruṣottama-bhakti* grounded in *Akṣara-rūpatā*.

Shakespeare’s love remains until “the edge of doom.” Akṣara–Puruṣottama devotion aims beyond death toward eternal service and bliss in Akṣaradhāma.

12. Other Scriptural Parallels

12.1 Nārada Bhakti Sūtra

The *Nārada Bhakti Sūtra* defines bhakti as supreme love for God:

सा त्वस्मिन् परमप्रेमरूपा ।

sā tv asmin parama-prema-rūpā

Bhakti is of the nature of supreme love for Him.

This love is not a passing emotion. It is selfless, constant, and directed toward God. Shakespeare’s poem similarly separates true love from unstable feeling, although its immediate subject is human love.

12.2 Bhagavad Gītā 18.65

Śrī Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna:

मन्मना भव मद्भक्तो मद्याजी मां नमस्कुरु ।

मामेवैष्यसि सत्यं ते प्रतिजाने प्रियोऽसि मे ॥

*man-manā bhava mad-bhakto mad-yājī mām namaskuru
mām evaiṣyasi satyaṃ te pratijāne priyo ’si me*

Fix your mind on Me, become My devotee, worship Me, and bow to Me. You will surely come to Me; I promise this because you are dear to Me.

The verse combines mind, devotion, action, and loving relationship. Shakespeare’s “marriage of true minds” also suggests that true union includes the mind and not merely the body.

12.3 Rādhā and the gopīs

The devotion of the gopīs in the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa* represents complete love for Śrī Kṛṣṇa. Their

love continues even during separation. It is not destroyed Shakespeare's claim that true love does not "remove with the remover to remove."

The comparison must be made carefully. Shakespeare describes a human ideal of constancy, whereas the Bhāgavata presents divine devotion in which separation itself deepens remembrance of Bhagavān.

13. Comparative Understanding

Question	Sonnet 116	Vedic-Vedāntic understanding
What is true union?	Marriage of faithful minds	Union of hearts, duties, and sacred purpose
Does true love change?	No; it remains constant	Pure bhakti is firm and unobstructed
What threatens love?	Change, separation, storms, and Time	Ego, desire, attachment, māyā, and ignorance
What guides human life?	Love as a fixed star	God, scripture, Guru, and dharma
Does physical beauty last?	No; Time destroys it	The body is temporary and changeable
What is the basis of lasting love?	Constancy and truth	Selflessness, knowledge, faith, and devotion
What is the highest love?	Love that survives until doom	Eternal devotion to Parabrahman Puruṣottama

The movement of the poem may be interpreted spiritually as:

Physical Attraction → Mental Unity → Moral Constancy → Selfless Love → Unflinching Bhakti → Puruṣottama-prema

Conclusion

Sonnet 116 presents one of literature's strongest definitions of true love. Shakespeare rejects the idea that love is merely temporary emotion or physical attraction. Genuine love is a union of "true minds." It does not change when circumstances change, surrender when obstacles appear, or disappear when physical beauty fades.

The images of the fixed mark and guiding star show love as stable and dependable. The storm may be violent, and the ship may wander, but the mark and star remain firm. Time can destroy rosy lips and cheeks, but true love is not "Time's fool." It continues until "the edge of doom."

Vedic and Vedāntic scriptures offer meaningful parallels. The *Rgveda* prays for the union of two hearts in marriage. The Upaniṣads and *Bhagavad Gītā* distinguish the eternal self from the changing body. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* describes pure devotion as selfless and unobstructed. The *Vachanāmṛta* teaches unflinching affection for God, firm refuge, and *ekāntika bhakti*.

by physical distance. This provides a spiritual parallel to

At the same time, romantic love and divine devotion should not be treated as identical. Shakespeare's poem mainly defines ideal human love. Vedānta raises love to a spiritual level, where it becomes devotion based upon knowledge of the self and the greatness of God.

From the perspective of Akṣara-Puruṣottama Darśana, the highest form of unchanging love is reached when the aspirant becomes *akṣararūpa* through association with the Akṣarabrahma Guru and offers eternal devotion to Parabrahman Puruṣottama.

Shakespeare's central idea may therefore be expressed in Vedāntic terms:

Physical beauty changes, circumstances change, and the body changes; but love grounded in truth, selflessness, spiritual knowledge, and devotion remains firm. The highest such love is unflinching devotion to Puruṣottama.

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